In the years of good harvests life goes easily : rice is plentiful and there is money to buy vegetable seed. Sometimes there is even milk for the children. Through all the seasons, the generous and gentle Rukmani is content in her love and admiration for her husband Nathan and their playful children. Life in their little South Indian village has no luxuries to offer, but they have never known them and do not understand people who need them — like the jewelled wives who arrive with the officials in the new tannery.

The coming of the tannery seems to bring bad

long been notorious, is driven to more dangerous devices. The tannery eats up land and the landlords have to exact harsher terms. But still there is love, and Rukmani's children grow up clever and strong

In that land, however, where all depends on rain and rice, life can become relentlessly hard : fate has not yet finished with Rukmani and her children. But the family's loyalty and spirit is never broken, and still finds its own rewards.

JAICO BOOK

INDIA'S OWN POCKET ED.

NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Kamala Markandaya



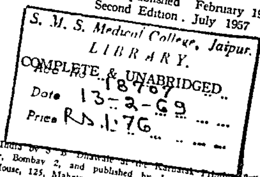
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NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And hope without an object cannot live.

—COLERIDGE

/ husband and I. How well I remember the day, : sudden sickness that overcame me when the moment arture came! My mother in the doorway, no tears /es but her face bloated with their weight. My father g a little in front of her, waiting to see us safely way. My husband, seated already on the bullock-th the tin trunk full of cooking vessels and my xt to him. Somehow I found myself also sitting cart, in finery, with downcast eyes Then the cart move, lurching as the bullocks got awkwardly into and I was sick Such a disgrace for me. 'How ver live it down?' I remember thinking 'I shall rget.' I haven't forgotten, but the memory is not My husband soothed and calmed me.

s a thing that might happen to anybody," he said. t fret. Come, dry your eyes and sit up here beside So I did, and after a while I felt better, the tears eyes and dried on my lashes.

six hours we rode on and on along the dusty road, , several villages on the way to ours, which was l distance away Half way there we stopped and meal: boiled rice, dhal, vegetables and curds A coconut apiece too, in which my husband nicked with his scythe for me so that I might drink the milk. Then he unyoked the bullocks and led them small pool of water near which we had stopped, them each a handful of hay Poor beasts, they . glad of the water, for already their hides were dusty stened with sweat in the sunlight.

ested a half-hour before resuming our journey The , refreshed, began stepping jauntily again, tossing eads and jangling the bells that hung from their nted horns. The air was full of the sound of the nd of birds, sparrows and bulbuls mainly, and some-the cry of an eagle, but when we passed a green and leafy, I could hear minahs and very warm, and, unused to so long a

Sometimes now I can see quite clearly · the veil is rent ıd for a few seconds I see blue skies and tender trees, ıen it closes on me again and once more I am back in a orld of my own, which darkens a little with each passing ıy. Yet not alone, for the faces of those I have loved, ıings that have been — shapes, forms, images — are always efore me; and sometimes they are so vivid that truly I ınnot say whether I see them or not, whether the veil is fted to allow me the sight, or whether it is only my mind ıat sees Today, for instance, I could see the brook that ın near our paddy field so clearly that I felt I had but to oop to feel its water wet on my hands Yet that brook elongs to a part of my life that is finished I was a bride *f only a week when I first followed it to look for a suitable* lace for my washing. I walked for nearly an hour before found a wide stretch of water and a sandy beach, with oulders scattered about. I put my bundle down, untied and put the clothes in The water was clear but not wift running — the linen did not float too far or too quickly way from my hands I tucked my sari up above my nees and stood in the river, scrubbing the clothes against large flat stone and using just a little of the washing owder my mother had given me, good stuff, with a clean weet smell and much power in it When I had finished, carried the clothes beyond the beach and laid them on he grassy bank to dry in the sun

Just then I saw Kali, wife of our neighbour, coming owards me, and with her were two women I had not een before All carried bundles of washing on their heads, ınd two had children at their hips and the third was expecting They called out when they saw me, and I came lown, a little shy, since they seemed to know each other o well; but before long I came to know them well too, hese three women who lived nearest to us, and whose lives vere so closely woven with mine Kali, big and p ith ample hips and thrusting breasts, whose vorked the next field to ours; Janaki, married to the hopkeeper, with her homely face and sagging

He considered. "You are not a child any more," he said at last. "You have grown fast since the day we were married, and that not so long ago"

While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work, getting up at sunrise and going to sleep content Peace and quiet were ours. How well I recall it, how grateful I am that not all the clamour which invaded our lives later could subdue the memory or still the longing for it. Rather, it has strengthened it had there not been what has been, I might never have known how blessed we were True, my husband did not own the land he tilled, as my father had done; yet the possibility was there that he might one day do so. We owned our own ploughing bullocks, we kept a milch goat From each harvest we saved, and had gunny-sacks full of the husked rice stored away in our small stone-lined granary. There was food in plenty for two people and we ate well: rice for morning and evening meals, dhal; sometimes a coconut grated fine and cooked in milk and sugar sometimes a wheatcake, fried in butter and melting in the mouth

Once or twice a week I would go to the village to buy sugar, ghee and vegetables, calling on the way home at Durgan the milkman's to get curds, for our goat was running dry and there was not always enough milk to make my own. I liked going to the village and meeting its people, for they were a friendly lot and most of them anxious to help if they could. I got to know them all very quickly: Old Granny, who lived on what she made by selling peanuts and guavas; Hanuman, the general merchant; Perumal, husband of Janaki, who kept the only shop, and Biswas, the money-lender. Sometimes Janaki or Kali would come to see how I was getting on, but not often, for they were kept busy looking after husband and children As for Kunthi, very

soon she was unable to do anything for herself, for was a thin, slight girl, and we had to go in turns to her provisions and to help her with the work in the house. Kunthi was different from the other women, quieter, more reserved, and for all that we tried to be at ease with there was a barrier which we could not surmount. Especially high against me it stood, strange and forbidding, though why this should be I could not think, finally . it down to my imagination

She had, everybody said, married beneath her. Perhaps they said that of me too, but I was plain and she was pretty so it didn't make sense in her case For myself, I am glad I married 'beneath me,' for a finer man no one could have had ; but possibly she was not so lucky.

A man is indeed fortunate if he does not marry abo for if he does he gets a wife who is no help to h soever, only an ornament I know, for I was igr rant of the simplest things, and no ornament either. K and Janaki between them had to show me how to m the goat, how to plant seed, how to churn butter fro milk, and how to hull rice What patience indeed r husband must have had, to put up with me uncomplaining during those early days of our married lives! Not o cross word or impatient look, and praise for whatever sm success I achieved. I had planted, in the flat patch ground behind the hut, a few pumpkin seeds. The s here was rich, never having yielded before, and loose that it did not require much digging. The seeds sprout quickly, sending up delicate green shoots that I kept car fully watered, going several times to the well nearby fo the purpose. Soon they were not delicate but sprawlin vigorously over the earth, and pumpkins began to form which, fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled dail larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until a last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration, and mad much of this one fruit — he who was used to harvesting field at a time

"One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin efore," I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping ıy eyes down.

"Not from our land," said Nathan. "Therefore it is recious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman"

I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be off-hand put the pumpkin away. But pleasure was making my ulse beat, the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to ıy face.

After that, ten times more zealous, I planted beans and weet potatoes, brinjals and chillies, and they all grew well nder my hand, so that we ate even better than we had one before

CHAPTER II

KUNTHI's child was born a few months before mine, a fine boy who nearly took his mother's life in or his own. Janaki was ill and could not come, vas away, therefore I had to do what I could. usband went off to fetch the midwife, leaving me he sweating girl. When she saw who I was — not at or she was half-dazed with pain — Kunthi cried out th he did not want me.

"You must go," she kept entreating

"Why," I said. "Do you dislike me so much, then?"

No, no, but please go I do not want you here."

I cannot and will not Besides there is no one else."

I shall be all right The midwife will be here soon."

"And what will your husband say," I said, "if I leave ou here alone?" and I took no more notice of her cries.

When she saw I would not go, she grew still and lay ke a log, not a murmur from her, but the sweat forcing tself up in oily drops on her throat and temples.

Kunthi was lying in an exhausted sleep, with her baby eside her, before I went home. It was a whole day since had left. Nathan was waiting for me and he said crossly:

"You look like a corpse. Whatever possessed you to stay o long?"

"Blame the midwife," I said. "She could not be found. r blame Kunthi's son He took a long time."

I was tired and my voice was on edge.

"Well, so long as you don't forget you are pregnant," e said shortly and turned away. It was the first time I ad seen him angry. Tears came pricking at my eyeballs. sat down to stop my head from spinning, and after a while the pain went. 'He means well,' I thought. 'He s anxious only about our child. Better that he should vorry than that he should not.'

From then 'on, I began to take more care of myself, ving more and more of the work to Nathan. Sowing e was at hand and there was plenty to be done in the ds · dams of clay to be built to ensure proper irriga- n of the paddy terraces; the previous year's stubble to lifted; rushes and weeds to be destroyed; then the nsplanting. All this meant stooping, and Nathan would : hear of it

With the leisure I now had I took up writing again. was my father who taught me to read and write. People d he did it because he wanted his children to be one t above the rest. perhaps so, but I am certain that he o knew that it would be a solace to me in affliction, a y amid tranquillity So he taught his six children, my- f the youngest by ten years, with the patience he brought all things 'Practise hard,' he would say, watching me sy with slate and pencil 'For who knows what dowry ere will be for you when you are ready!' And I, with .y, the thistledown of childish care upon me, would listen htly and take up my pencil again

'What use,' my mother said, 'that a girl should be arned! Much good will it do her when she has lusty ns and a husband to look after Look at me, am I any orse that I cannot spell my name, so long as I know it? not my house clean and sweet, are not my children well d and cared for?' My father laughed and said 'Indeed ey are,' and did not pursue the matter: nor did he give his teaching.

'When my child is ready,' I thought now, 'I will teach m too'; and I practised harder than ever lest my fingers ould lose their skill When Janaki, recovered from her ckness, came to see me, she marvelled that I could write; t Kali, who had come too, was scornful of the strange mbols which had no meaning for her and dismissed foible of pregnancy.

"You will forget all about such nonsense when ild is born," she said. "Besides, there will be

ny eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; zed, wondrous.

You will get used to it," Nathan said. "After many ings and harvestings you will not notice these things." re have been many sowings and harvestings, but the ider has not departed

was tying the bean tendrils to the wire fence I had lt when I saw a quiver in the leaves of the pumpkins. fruit is ripening, I thought, the birds are already here perhaps mice. Leaving the beans I went to look, stooping part the leaves with my hand

Why did not the snake strike at once?

Was the cobra surprised into stillness that a human uld dare to touch it? My hands recoiled from the dness of serpent flesh, my nails clawed at my palms, leaves I had parted moved back to cover it For a ment my legs remained stiffly planted beside the pump-s, then the blood came racing to my limbs again, and an from the spot screeching with fear and not looking ind me.

Nathan came rushing to me, almost knocking me over, ught and shook me

"What is it, what is it?" he shouted roughly.

"A snake," I whispered, bereft of voice and breath. "A bra I touched it."

He looked at me as if I were mad.

"Go in and stay there," he said. I wanted only to fall his feet in my terror, to beg him not to leave me alone, it he was staring at me unrelenting At last I went, wed, but with the waters of panic receding

"The snake had not stirred" Nathan said as he came ck. He had cut it to pieces with his scythe and buried e remains so that I should not be upset

"Yet you have lived long enough to learn to disregard em," he said "Are they not found everywhere — tree akes, water snakes and land snakes? You only need be careful and they pass you by."

"True," I said, shamefaced yet rallying "But

e baby had awakened and was crying loudly, so that had to yell I was so pleased to see her whole, I could : speak for relief. At last I told her, shakily, about the ra, and, rather ashamed by now of making such a fuss, exaggerated a little, making the snake enormous of its d, and the danger more deadly than it had been.

Women can sometimes be more soothing than men : so w Kali. "Poor thing," she said "No wonder you are rified. Anyone would be. But it is a pity your husband led the snake, since cobras are sacred"

"She is a fool," Nathan said contemptuously when I d him. "What would she have me do — worship it while dug its fangs in my wife? Go now — forget it."

I think I did, although once or twice when I saw the ickness of the pumpkin vines I wondered nervously what ight lie concealed there; and then I would take up knife id shovel to clear away the tangle; but when I drew near id saw the broad glossy leaves and curling green tendrils could not bring myself to do it; and now I am glad I d not, for that same vine yielded to me richly, pumpkin ter pumpkin of a size and colour that I never saw elsehere

We called our daughter Irawaddy, after one of the great vers of Asia, for of all things water was most precious o us; but it was too long a name for the tiny little thing ie was, and soon she became Ira Nathan at first paid ant attention to her: he had wanted a son to continue is line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling ifant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing ut a memory behind; but soon she stopped being a puling ifant, and when at the age of ten months she called him Apa', which means father, he began to take a lively interest ı her.

She was a fair child, lovely and dimpled with soft, gleamng hair I do not know where she got her looks; not rom me, nor from Nathan, but there it was, and not only e but other people noticed and remarked on it. I id not know how I could have produced so

child, and I was proud of her and glad, even when . . . pretended to disbelieve that I could be her mother . . . is a marvel indeed,' they would say, and make . . . with ordinary parents who sometimes bore a child of m . . . less brilliance, or with a devout couple who had bro . . . forth a wretch. I preferred to think the plain have t . . . rewards, and this was mine.

"She is like you," Nathan would say to me as he . . . veyed her, but he was the only one who thought so.

Before long she was crawling all over the place, follo . . . her father into the fields, trailing me as I went about . . . work, and very soon she began to walk.

"You must not allow it so early," Kali said to me . . . nously, "or her legs will bend like hoops" And at . . . I listened to her and whenever I saw Ira trying to . . . up or walk, I would rush forward and pick her up . . . soon there was no stopping her I should have be . . . it the whole time otherwise, and I had other things . . . Sowing time was at hand, and I was out all day . . . Nathan planting the paddy in the drained fields. . . . had to be sown too, the land was ready My hu . . . ploughed it, steadying the plough behind the two bu . . . while I came behind, strewing the seed to either sid . . . sprinkling the earth over from the basket at my hip.

When that was done, it was time for our hut to be . . . ched. It had stood up well to sun and wind, but . . . the monsoon rains several small patches showed wear . . . it was as well to get things done in good time. N . . . cut fronds from the coconut palm that grew by our . . . and dried them for me, together we twisted the fibre . . . bound the palms, shaping them to the roof and streng . . . ing the whole with clay

Ira was no trouble at all She would sit happily pla . . . by herself in the sun, chuckling at the birds or at anyt . . . else she could see, including her fond parents; or if it . . . hot and she grew fretful I would hang a cloth . . . branch and put her in it, and she would go to sleep . . . out any further bother. My mother, especially, grew

l of her and came to see us often, although it meant
elling several hours in a bullock cart, which is very
ıg when one is no longer young. Sometimes I would
to see my parents, but seldom, since there was so much
be done in my own home ; and my mother, knowing this,
not reproach me for the long intervals between my
ts.

CHAPTER III

'Do not worry,' they said. 'You will be putting h in your face.' They still say it, but the lines already there and they are silent about *that*. Kali said and I knew she was thinking of her own brood. Ka said it, and in her eyes lay the knowledge of her children. Janaki said, morosely, she wished it could to her : a child each year was no fun. Only Nathan not say it to me, for he was worried too, and knew b We did not talk about it, it was always with us : a fear that Ira was to be our only child

My mother, whenever I paid her a visit, would me accompany her to a temple, and together we pray and pray before the deity, imploring for help we were giddy. But the Gods have other things to they cannot attend to the pleas of every suppliant dares to raise his cares to heaven And so the years by and still we had only one child, and that a daught

When Ira was nearing six, my mother was afflicted consumption, and was soon so feeble that she could rise from her bed Yet in the midst of her pain she still think of me, and one day she beckoned me near placed in my hand a small stone lingam, symbol of fert

"Wear it," she said. "You will yet bear many I see them, and what the dying see will come to pass be assured, this is no illusion"

"Rest easy," I said. "You will recover."

She did not — no one expected she would — but lingered for a long time. In her last months my f sent for the new doctor who had settled in the vill Nobody knew where he came from or who paid him, there he was, and people spoke well of him; though he a foreigner. As for my father, he would have called the Devil himself to spare my mother any suffering.

was in a house of sorrow that I first met Kennington, om people called Kenny. He was tall and gaunt, with pale skin and sunken eyes the colour of a kingfisher's ng, neither blue nor green. I had never seen a white n so close before, and so I looked my fill.

"When you have done with staring," he said coldly, erhaps you will take me to your mother."

I started, for I had not realised I was goggling at him. artled, too, that he should have spoken in our tongue.

"I will show you," I said, stumbling in my confusion.

My mother knew no man could save her and she did not pect miracles. Between her and this man, young though was, lay mutual understanding and respect, one for the her. He told her no lies, and she trusted him. He came ten, sometimes even when he was not summoned; and s presence, as much as the powders and pills he made r take, gave my mother her ease. When she died it was the same way, without a struggle, so that although we ieved for her our hearts were not torn by her suffering.

Before I left for my village, I told him that for what e had done there could be no repayment. "Remember nly," I said, "that my home is yours, and all in it."

He thanked me gravely, and as I turned to go he raised hand to stop me.

"There is a look about you," he said. "It lies in your yes and the mark is on your face. What is it?"

"Would you not grieve too," I said, "if the woman ho gave you birth was no more than a handful of dust?"

"It is not that alone The hurt is of longer standing. Vhy do you lie?"

I looked up and his eyes were on me. 'Surely,' I thought, my mother has told him, for he knows'; but as if he uessed my thoughts he shook his head. "No, I do not now. Tell me"

I held back. He was a foreigner, and although I no onger stood in awe of him, still the secret has been long ocked up in my breast and would not come out easily.

As for Nathan, nothing would do but that the whole
lage should know—as if they didn't already On the
th day from the birth he invited everybody to feast and
oice with us in our good fortune Kali and Janaki both
ne to help me prepare the food, and even Kunthi's reserve
umbled a little as she held up my son to show him to our
sitors. Between us we prepared mounds of rice, tinting
with saffron and frying it in butter, made hot curries
dishes of jaggery
er the fire, filled
it plantain leaves
is ready we spread
e leaves under the gaudy marriage pandal Nathan had
rrowed for the occasion and ate and drank for long,
rry hours. Afterwards Kunthi was persuaded to play
us on her bulbul tara, which she did skilfully, plucking
the strings with her slender fingers and singing in a low
ar voice which people strained to hear, so that it was very
iet.

The baby, who had slept through all the clamour, woke
now in the sudden hush and began squalling. Kunthi
opped her thrumming People crowded round me, trying
pat the baby who had caused all this excitement—al-
ough he was no beauty, with puckered face and mouth
ened wide to emit shriek after shriek.

"Such a furore," Kali said "One would think the child
d wings, at the very least."

"Seven years we have waited," said Nathan, his eyes
nting, "wings or no wings."

The one person I had wanted most to see at our feast
is not there. I had gone to seek him, but he was not
be found. 'He goes and comes,' they told me. 'Nobody
ows where or why.' So I had to be content without him;
contentment cannot be forced, and Nathan noticed my
occupation

"What now?" he said. "Are you not happy? Would
have the moon too, as Kali would have wings?"

"Indeed no," I said, "it is just that I would have l to see Kenny under our roof. He did so much for mother." 'And for us,' I thought, but could not say for at the beginning I had not wished my husband to that I was putting myself in the hands of a foreigner, I knew not what his reaction would be. I had cons myself that it would be time enough to tell him if a c was born; and now I found I could not do it, because would surely ask why I had not told him before. .. 'W harm,' I thought, 'if he does not know; I have not lied him, there has just been this silence.'

In our sort of family it is as well to be the first bo what resources there are, have later to be shared out smaller and smaller portions Ira had been fed well milk and butter and rice; Arjun too, for he was the boy. But for those who came after, there was less less. Four more sons I borne in as many years — Tha Murugan, Raja and Selvam. It was as if all the pe desires of my childless days were now bearing frui was very fortunate for they were, without excep healthy; and in their infancy and childhood my daug looked after them almost as much as I did. She wa great one for babies, handling them better than man grown woman while she was still a child.

How quickly children grow! They are infants — look away a minute and in that time they have left t babyhood behind. Our little girl ran about in the bare and beautiful as she grew, with no clothes to ham her limbs or confine her movements. Then one day w she was five — long before Arjun was born — Nathan poin her out to me as she played in the fields.

"Cover her," he said. "It is time."

I wanted to cry out that she was a baby still, but course Nathan was right: she had left infancy for eve And so I made a skirt for her, weaving bright colours in the white cotton that she might like it, and so she di a time, wearing it gladly, twirling it about her as she round and round; but when the novelty had worn off,

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

SOMETIMES at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering sky turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers wake, and he softly departs

One by one they come out into the early morning sunshine, my son, my daughter: Puli, the child I clung to who was not mine, and he no longer a child Puli is with me because I tempted him, out of my desperation I lured him away from his soil to mine. Yet I have no fears now; what is done is done, there can be no repining 'Are you happy with me?' I said to him yesterday — being sure of the answer. He nodded, not hesitating, but a little impatient. An old woman's foibles A need for comfort.

But I am comforted most when I look at his hands. He has no fingers, only stubs, since what has been taken can never be given back, but they are clean and sound. Where the sores were, there is now pink puckered flesh, his limbs are untouched. Kenny and Selvam between them have kept my promise to him.

In the distance when it is a fine day and my sight is not too dim, I can see the building where my son works. He and Kenny, the young and the old A large building, spruce and white; not only money has built it but men's hopes and pity, as I know who have seen it grow brick by brick and year by year.

taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it Thangam, only relations from our own village came wedding and not from the surrounding districts as th had done before, and the only jewel she had was a diam nose-screw.

'What for you,' my mother would say, taking my in her hands, 'my last-born, my baby? Four downe too much for a man to bear.' 'I shall have a grand w ding,' I would say. 'Such that everybody will remem when all else is a dream forgotten' (I had heard this ph in a storyteller's tale). 'For is not my father head of t village?' I knew this pleased my mother, for she wo at once laugh, and lose her look of worry. Once w I repeated this, my eldest brother overheard me, and said sharply, 'Don't speak like a fool, the headman is longer of consequence There is the Collector, who co to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, o those he appoints, not to the headman'

This was the first time I had ever heard that my fat was of no consequence It was as if a prop on wh leaned had been roughly kicked away, and I felt fright d and refused to believe him. But of course he was rig and by the time I came to womanhood even I had cknowledge that his prestige was much diminished. Perha hat was why they could not find me a rich husband, a narried me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everythi ut in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took the age of twelve Our relatives, I know, murmured th the match was below me; my mother herself was no happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry ar it was the best she could do 'A poor match,' they said and not always quietly. How little they knew, any of them

A woman, they say, always remembers her wedding night Well, may be they do; but for me there are othe nights I prefer to remember, sweeter, fuller, when I wen to my husband matured in mind as well as in body, no as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night And when the religious ceremonies had been completed, w

ne fractious and wanted to tear it from her. It was y a month before she resigned herself to it.

th six children to feed we could no longer afford to all the vegetables we grew. Once a week I would and pack our garden produce, selecting the best and ng the spoilt or bruised vegetables for ourselves, cover basket with leaves and set off for the village. Old my was always glad to buy from me, and at first I d make straight for the corner of the street where she with her gunny-sack spread before her The old lady ld pick out the purple brinjals and yellow pumpkins, shiny green and red chillies, feeling them with her ikled fingers and complimenting me on their size

None like yours," she would say. "Such colour, such loom on them!" Perhaps she said it to everyone who e to her, but I would feel absurdly pleased and go y with my insides smiling Then one day Biswas, the ney-lender, stopped me in the street I would have sed after a brief salutation, for among us there is a dis- of the money-lending class, but he stood squarely in path.

Ah, Rukmani," he said, "in a hurry as usual, I see."

My children are not of an age to be left alone for long," l I, speaking civilly

'Yet surely you have time for a little business with ?"

If you will tell me what business?"

'Buying and selling," he said, cackling, "which is your iness, as lending is mine."

'If you will make yourself clear," I said, "I will stay l hear; otherwise I must be on my way"

'Those vegetables," he said, "that Old Granny buys from 1 What price does she pay you?"

A fair price," I said, "and no haggling"

"I will pay you four annas a dozen for brinjals, and annas each for pumpkins, if they are large." He was ering almost double what Old Granny paid.

I went away. The following week I sold almost

whole basket to him, keeping only a little for Old Gr
I did not like selling to him, although he paid me a b
price. It was business and nothing else with him, a
a word of chaff or a smile — or perhaps it was the E
I missed — and I would much rather have had it the
way, but there you are, you cannot choose.

To my surprise Old Granny made no comment, b
smiling reassuringly when I muttered guiltily that our
at home were growing. In the beginning she may not
known, but when I sold her, week after week, one
pumpkin or half a dozen brinjals she must have
the truth. But she said nothing, nor did I, for we
knew she could not pay me more, and I could not
to sell for less. As it was, we were going short of
things. We no longer had milk in the house, exce
the youngest child; curds and butter were beyond our
except on rare occasions. But we never went hun
some of the families were doing. We grew our own
tains and coconuts, the harvests were good and ther
always food in the house — at least a bagful of r
little dhal, if no more. Then when the rice terraces
drained, there was the fish, spawned among the paddy
what we could not eat, we dried and salted away.
every month I put away a rupee or two against the
Ira would be married. So we still could not grumble

CHAPTER IV

:HANGE I had known before, and it had been gradual. My father had been headman once, a person of con- juence in our village: I had lived to see him relinquish is importance, but the alteration was so slow that we rdly knew when it came. I had seen both my parents ık into old age and death, and here too there was no blence But the change that now came into my life, o all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed ought in the twinkling of an eye

Arjun came running to us with the news He had run the way from the village and we had to wait while he lped in fresh air. "Hundreds of men," he gasped "They e pulling down houses ... and there is a

eyes popping
ing back," he

vas measuring
new tannery
ley are building," he said. "I had heard rumours"

Arjun, torn between a desire to dash back and a craving hear more from his father, teetered anxiously to and fro n his heels; but Nathan said no more. He put the grain way carefully in the granary, then he rose "Come," he id "We will see."

All the families were out: the news had spread quickly ali and her husband, Kunthi and her boys, Janaki, irrounded by her numerous family, even Old Granny, had ome out to see. Children were everywhere, dodging in and ut of the crowd and crying out to each other in shrill xcited voices Startled pi-dogs added to the din. We ormed a circle about the first arrivals, some fifty men or

so, who were unloading bricks from the bullock-carts spoke in our language, but with an intonation which it difficult for us to understand them.

"Townspeople," Kali whispered to me. "They say have travelled more than a hundred miles to get h She was prone to exaggerate, and also believed what was told her.

In charge of the men was an overseer who looked spoke like the men, but who was dressed in a shirt trousers, and he had a hat on his head such as I had seen Kenny wear before: a topee the colour of t The others wore loin-cloths and turbans and a few shirts; but as the day wore on they doffed their shirt by one, until all were as our men.

The men worked well and quickly, with many a long glance at us, they seemed to enjoy having c such a stir and lured such a big *audience*. As fo overseer, he made much play of his authority, di them with loud voice and many gestures but doin a stroke of work himself Still, it must have been h him standing there waving his arms about, for the he wore was sticking to his back and now and th would lift his hat as if to allow the wind to cool his

Until at last there was a commotion about the of the circle of which we were the inner ring. The c was parting, and as the movement spread to us we way too, to let a tall white man through. He had white topee, and was accompanied by three or four dressed like him in shorts. The overseer now came ward, bowing and scraping, and the red-faced one s to him rapidly but so low that we could not hear what was saying. The overseer listened respectfully and t began telling us to go, not to disturb the men, altho for so long he had been glad of many watchers In maidan, in our village he stood, telling us to go.

"As if he owned us," muttered Kannan the chakkli, think that already he foresaw his livelihood being from him, for he salted and tanned his own skins, mak

n into chaplis for those in the village who wore them. he stood his ground, glaring at the overseer and refusing move, as did a few others who resented the haughty ers that poured from the man's lips; but most of us it, having our own concerns to mind

Every day for two months the line of bullock-carts came laden with bricks and stones and cement, sheets of tin l corrugated iron, coils of rope and hemp The kilns the neighbouring villages were kept busy firing the ks, but their output was insufficient, and the carts had go further afield, returning dusty and brick-filled Day l night women twisted rope, since they could sell as much they made, and traders waxed prosperous selling their ds to the workmen They were very well paid, these n, some of them earning two rupees in a single day, where-even in good times we seldom earned as much, and they ight lavishly: rice and vegetables and dhal, sweetmeats l fruit. Around the maidan they built their huts, for re was no other place for them, and into these brought

ist a load of tin sheeting to the roof.

Then one day the building was completed. The workers parted, taking with them their goods and chattels, aving only the empty huts behind. There was a silence. the unwonted quiet we all wondered apprehensively what ould happen next. A week went by and another. Losing ir awe we entered the building, poking into its holes and rners, looking into the great vats and drums that had en installed, then, curiosity slaked, we set about our old ks on the land and in our homes.

There were some among the traders — those who had it up their prices and made their money — who regretted eir going. Not I. They had invaded our village with itter and din, had taken from us the maidan, ere

children played, and had made the bazaar prices too for us. I was not sorry to see them go

"They will be back," said Nathan my husband, others will take their place And did you not benefit for their stay, selling your pumpkins and plantains for be prices than you did before?"

"Yes," said I for I had, "but what could I buy the money with prices so high everywhere? No sugar dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came, and we have had none so long as they remained"

"Nevertheless," said Nathan, "they will be back; you may be sure they did not take so much trouble to leave a shell in our midst Therefore it is as well accept these things."

"Never, never," I cried "They may live in our but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands on us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our chil go without the food that their children gorge, and it is in the hope that one day things will be as they were we have done these things Now that they have gone us forget them and return to our ways"

"Foolish woman," Nathan said. "There is no going Bend like the grass that you do not break."

Our children had not seen us so serious, so before. Three of my sons huddled together in a corner at us with wide eyes, the two youngest lay asleep, on Ira's arms, the other leaning heavily against her; and herself sagged against the wall with their weight as she there on the floor There was a look on her love face that pierced me.

"Ah well," I said, dissembling, "perhaps I exagg If they return we shall have a fine dowry for our daug and that is indeed a good thing"

The lost look went from Ira's face. She was a still, despite the ripeness of her thirteen years, and no fancied a grand wedding even as I had done.

They came back. Not the same men who

ıers, and not all at once but slowly. The red-faced ite man came back with a foreman, and took charge everything. He did not live in the village but came d went, whilst his men took over the huts that had lain ıpty, the ones who came last settling beside the river, inging their wives and children with them, or dotting : maidan even more thickly with the huts they built · themselves and their families

I went back to my home, thankful that a fair distance ll lay between them and us, that although the smell their brews and liquors hung permanently in the sickened ·, still their noise came to us from afar.

"You are a queer being," Kunthi said, her brows flaring ray from her eyes "Are you not glad that our village no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon ere will be shops and tea-stalls, and even a bioscope, such I have been to before I was married. You will see."

"No doubt I will," I said. "It will not gladden me lready my children hold their noses when they go by, ıd all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever ɔu go Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else ıeir calls are lost to us"

"You are a village girl," said Kunthi, and there were ıadows of contempt moving behind her eyes. "You do ot understand."

If I was a village girl, Kali and Janaki were too, and ad no taste for the intruders; but after awhile Janaki onfessed that at least she now knew what to do with ıer sons, for the land could not take them all; and as or Kali, well, she had always been fond of an audience or her stories. So they were reconciled and threw the ıast away with both hands that they might be the readier [illegible] n pain, envying such [illegible]

CHAPTER V

IN all the years of our tenancy we never saw the Zemindar who owned our land Sivaji acted for him, and being kindly, humane man we counted ourselves lucky Unke some, he did not extract payment in kind to the last rain; he allowed us to keep the gleanings, he did not emand from us bribes of food or money, nor did he claim or himself the dung from the fields which he might easily ave done, stipulating only that Kali and I should gather ur share on different days to avoid arguments This way e got fairly equal quantities and there was no bad blood etween us

One morning, so early that the dew still jewelled the rass and the clamour of the tannery had not yet begun, went out on my errand It was as well to go out early, therwise you could never tell how much had already been aken by urchins, for dung was easy to sell and commanded good price Several times before, I had seen boys on the and and had chased them from it, but without succeeding n getting hold of their loot

That morning there were a lot of pickings, I soon filled the small basket I had with me As I bent down for the last handful I became aware that someone was watching me.

It was Kenny, thinner than when I had last seen him, but how could I ever forget him? Leaving my basket, I ran to him, dirty hands and all, with a glad welcoming heart

"My lord, my benefactor," I cried. "Many a time I have longed to see you. Now at last you come," and I bent down to kiss his feet, shod as they were in leather shoes. He withdrew them quickly and told me to get up

"I am not a benefactor," he said, "nor a lord What ails you?"

"You *are* my benefactor," I said stoutly "Have I not five sons to prove it?"

"Am I to blame for your excesses," said he, but his eyes were alight with laughter, no doubt at my fallen face.

"Come with me," I said, recovering myself. "You see them, excesses or not."

"For a few minutes only, I am busy," he replied, as I picked up my basket he peered in. "I see you c dung and take it with you. Is it not for the land?"

"Indeed no Dung is too useful in our homes given to the land, for it is fuel to us and protection a damp and heat and even ants and mice. Did you not kn

"Too well," he answered shortly "I have seen women for ever making dung-cakes and burning then smearing their huts. Yet I thought you would know who live by the land yet think of taking from it w giving."

"What substitute then?" I said quietly

He made no reply but came after me. All the ch were awake, waiting for their morning meal of rice-v Nathan was working in the fields, and I sent one o boys to call him in. For Kenny I spread a mat an sat down while we grouped ourselves about him, b could see he was not accustomed to sitting cross-legge the floor, for his knees instead of resting on the mat sp up aslant like the horns of a bull, and I was uncomfor for him, and distressed that I had nothing else to off

Ira strained the rice-water into wooden bowls for the rice itself we kept for our midday meal — but to bowl she added a handful of the cooked rice and a salt, which we could not afford for ourselves, and this handed to Kenny, stooping low and keeping her eyes d

"My daughter Irawaddy," I said, proud that she sh know her duties to a guest.

Kenny took the bowl from her with a smile.

"You are a good cook for one so young," he said, la his hand for a moment on her head. She did not r her eyes, but her face kindled, and I was pleased too t he should notice my child. He spoke to each of the

n turn until Murugan, my third son, came bouncing in eading his father by the hand

"You have heard me tell of Kenny often enough," I aid "This is he, friend to my father's house." So much said, and left the other unsaid.

My husband made namaskar.

"I have," he replied formally, "and I am happy that e should honour our poor household by his presence"

"Yet not so poor," the other replied politely, "for the vomen of your house do you credit, and you have begotten ive healthy sons."

My heart quailed at his words for fear he should betray ne, yet no betrayal, since how could he guess my husband did not know I had gone to him for treatment? Why ad I, stupidest of women, not told him? I waited, gnawing ny lip, but he said no more

Kenny came often to our house thereafter Of himself e did not speak, of wife or children or parents or home. I held my tongue, for I felt to ask would be to offend him. Yet he had a love for children, mine were always eager to see him, making great fuss of him when he came, and he for his part would suffer them patiently, often bringing with him half a coconut or ladus made of nuts and rolled into balls with jaggery, which the children loved Once he came when I was suckling Selvam, my youngest son, who had turned three, and saw that my breasts were sore where the child's mouth had been.

"The boy is long past weaning," he said frowning "Why do you force it?"

"We had to sell our goat," I said. "I can no longer afford to buy milk, but while my son is young and needs it I will give it to him."

Thereafter he brought me a little cow's milk when he could, or sent it with one of the children from the village, who were always glad to help him, for he had a way of attracting children; there was ever a troop following him about.

before, he came and went mysteriously. I knew
nd the fact that he worked among the people of
ry, treating and healing their bodies during long
then going to his lone dwelling; but when he left
e, for days or years at a time, nobody knew when
or what he did, and when he returned he was
rn than ever and none dared ask.

CHAPTER VI

PT Ira as long as I could, but when she was past fourteen her marriage could be delayed no longer, for is well known with what speed eligible young men are apped up; as it was, most girls of her age were already arried or at least betrothed The choice of go-between is not easy to make: Kali was the nearest to hand and

ight well consider them suitable husbands, which I certainly uld not, for they owned no land Old Granny, on the her hand, would be the ideal go-between she was old d experienced, knew very well what to look for and never ked patience; but for some years now I had not traded th her and she might with every justification refuse to t for me. But in the end it was to her I went

"A dowry of one hundred rupees," I said "A maiden e a flower. Do your best for me and I shall be ever your debt. This I ask you," I said, looking straight at er, "although Biswas takes my produce and for you there as been nothing"

"I bear you no grudge, Rukmani," she replied "Times re hard and we must do what we can for ourselves and ur children. I will do my best."

Thereafter never a week went by but she brought news of this boy or that, and she and I and Nathan spent long hours trying to assess their relative merits At last we found one who seemed to fulfil our requirements: he was young and well favoured, the only son of his father from whom he would one day inherit a good portion of land.

"They will expect a large dowry," I said regretfully. "One hundred rupees will not win such a husband, we have no more"

"She is endowed with beauty," Old Granny said. "
will make up for a small dowry — in this case."

She was right. Within a month the preliminaries w
completed, the day was fixed. Ira accepted our choice
her usual docility, if she fretted at the thought of lea
us and her brothers she showed no sign. Only once
asked a little wistfully how frequently I would be abl
visit her, and, although I knew such trips would have t
very rare since her future home lay some ten villages a
I assured her not a year would pass without my goi
see her two or three times.

"Besides, you will not want me so often," I said "
home, your brothers, are all you have known so far
when you have your own home and your own childre
will not miss these. . ."

She nodded slightly, making no comment, yet I
how bruised she must be by the imminent parting.
spirit ached with pity for her, I longed to be able to
fort her, to convince her that in a few months' time
new home would be the most significant part of her
the rest only a preparation ..*but before this joy*
come the stress of parting, the loneliness of beginni
new life among strangers, the strain of the early day
marriage; and because I knew this the words would
come. .

Wedding day Women from the village came to a
Janaki, Kali, many I hardly knew We went with
to the river and, when she was freshly bathed, put on
the red sari I had worn at my own wedding Its
heavy folds made her look more slender than she was, m
her look a child .I darkened her eyes with kohl and
years fell away more, she was so pitifully young I co
hardly believe she was to be married, today.

The bridegroom arrived; his parents, his relatives,
friends, the priests. The drummer arrived and squatted o
side awaiting permission to begin; the fiddler joined h
There should have been other musicians — a flutist, a h
monium player, but we could not afford *these*.

ld have *nothing we could not pay for.* No debts, h- ited, no debts. But I grudged Ira nothing : had I not d from the day of her birth so that she should marry ? Now I brought out the stores I had put by month r month — rice and dhal and ghee, jars of oil, betel , areca nuts, chewing tobacco and copra

I didn't know you had so much," said Nathan in amaze- t.

And if you had there would be little enough," I said a wink at the women, " for men are like children and t grab what they see"

did not wait for his retort, hearing only the laughter greeted his sally, but went out to speak to the drum- . Arjun, my eldest son, was sitting next to the man, iously tapping the drum with three fingers as he had shown

There is plenty of food inside," I said to him. "Go and while there is still some left"

I can eat no more," he replied "I have been feasting day."

Nevertheless he had made provision for the morrow · iw in his lap a bundle bulging with food ; sugar-syrup butter had soaked through the cloth patchily.

Join your brothers," I said, hoisting him up "The mmer is going to be busy."

e ran off, clinging tightly to his bundle. The wedding ic began. Bride and groom were sitting uneasily side side, Ira stiff in the heavy embroidered sari, white flowers ier hair, very pale. They did not look at each other. ut them were packed some fourteen or fifteen people — hut could hold no more. The remainder sat outside on n leaves the boys had collected.

What a good match,' everybody said 'Such a fine , such a beautiful girl, too good to be true.' It was ed. Old Granny went about beaming : it was , brought the two parties together ; her r ichmaker would be higher than ever. We ld look into the future.

So they were married. As the light faded two yo[illegible] appeared bearing a palanquin for the newly married co[illegible] lowered it at the entrance to the hut for them to step [illegible] Now that it was time to go, Ira looked scared, she hes[illegible] a little before entering: but already a dozen willing h[illegible] had lifted her in. The crowd, full of good feeling, m[illegible] with food and drunk with the music, vicariously [illegible] pressed round, eagerly thrusting over their heads g[illegible] after garland of flowers, the earth was spattered with f[illegible] In the midst of the crush Nathan and I, Nathan holding his hands to Ira in blessing, she with dark head bent to receive it. Then the palanquin was lifted up, the bearers closed in, the musicians took their places followed on foot behind, relatives, friends, well-wishers hangers-on. Several children had added themselves to company; the came after, jigging about in high glee, [illegible] and excited: a long, ragged tail-end to the procession

Past the fields, through the winding streets of the vi[illegible] we went, the bobbing palanquin ahead of us Until came at last to where, at a decorous distance, the bull cart waited to take them away.

Then it was all over, the bustle, the laughter, the m[illegible] The wedding guests departed. The throng melted. A a while we walked back together to our hut. Our sons, t[illegible] out, were humped together asleep, the youngest clutch a sugary confection in one sticky fist. Bits of food lay ev[illegible] where. I swept the floor clean and strewed it with lea[illegible] The walls showed cracks, and clods of mud had fal[illegible] where people had bumped against them, but these I k[illegible] for patching in the morning The used plantain leaves stacked in one heap — they would do for the bullocks. T[illegible] stars were pale in the greying night before I lay down bes[illegible] my husband. Not to sleep but to think. For the first ti[illegible] since her birth, Ira no longer slept under our roof.

CHAPTER VII

ATURE is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk ·ily with thought and care, so long will it give you its ; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, it has you by the throat

·ra had been given in marriage in the month of June, ich is the propitious season for weddings, and what with preparing for it, and the listlessness that took hold of in the first days after her departure, nothing was done make our hut weatherproof or to secure the land from oding · That year the monsoon broke early with an evil ensity such as none could remember before

It rained so hard, so long and so incessantly that the ought of a period of no rain provoked a mild wonder. was as if nothing had ever been but rain, and the water tilessly found every hole in the thatched roof to come in, ripping on to the already damp floor If we had not uilt on high ground the very walls would have melted that moisture I brought out as many pots and pans s I had and we laid them about to catch the drips, but oon there were more leaks than we had vessels . Fortunately, I had laid in a stock of firewood for Ira s wedding, nd the few sticks that remained served at least to cook ur rice, and while the fire burnt, hissing at the water in e wood, we huddled round trying to get dry. At first he children were cheerful enough — they had not known such things before, and the lakes and rivulets that formed outside gave them endless delight , but Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while the waters rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost.

"It is a bad season," Nathan said sombrely. "The rains have destroyed much of our work , there will eating done this year.'

At his words, Arjun broke into doleful sobs and his brot Thambi, followed suit. They were old enough to underst but the others, who weren't, burst into tears too, for by n they were cramped and out of humour with sitting crou on the damp floor; and hungry since there was little to for most of the food had gone to make the wedding f and the new season's harvesting lay outside ungathered rotting. I hushed them as best I could, throwing a repro ful glance at my husband for his careless words, but was unnoticing, sunk in hatred and helplessness.

As night came on — the eighth night of the monsoo the winds increased, whining and howling around our as if seeking to pluck it from the earth. Indoors it dark — the wick, burning in its shallow saucer of oil, only a dim wavering light — but outside the land glimm sometimes pale and sometimes vivid, in the flicker of l ning. Towards midnight the storm was at its worst. L ning kept clawing at the sky almost continuously, thu shook the earth. I shivered as I looked — for I could sleep, and even a prayer came with difficulty.

"It cannot last," Nathan said. "The storm will abat the morning"

Even as he spoke a streak of lightning threw itself d at the earth, there was a tremendous clap of thunder, when I uncovered my shrinking eyes I saw that our c nut palm had been struck That, too, the storm had clai for its own.

In the morning everything was calm. Even the rain l stopped. After the fury of the night before, an stillness lay on the land I went out to see if anyth could be saved of the vegetables, but the shoots and vi were battered and broken, torn from their supports a bruised; they did not show much sign of surviving. T corn field was lost Our paddy field lay beneath a pla lake on which the children were already sailing bits wood.

Many of our neighbours fared much worse than we ha Several were homeless, and of a group of men who

der a tree when the storm began six had been killed by
htning.

Kali's hut had been completely destroyed in the last final
ry of the storm. The roof had been blown away bodily,
e mud walls had crumbled

"At least it stood until the worst was over," said Kali
me, "and by God's grace we were all spared" She
oked worn out, in the many years I had known her I
d never seen her so deflated She had come to ask for
me palm leaves to thatch the new hut her husband was
ilding; but I could only point to the blackened tree,
s head bitten off and hanging by a few fibres from the
ithered stump

"We must thatch our roof before the night," I said
The rains may come again. We need rice too"

Nathan nodded "We may be able to buy palm leaves
the village—also rice."

He went to the granary in a corner of which the small
oth bundle of our savings lay buried. It had been heavy
nce, when we were newly married . now the faded rag in
hich it was tied was too big and the ends flapped loosely
ver the knot. Nathan untied it and counted out twelve
upees.

"One will be enough," I said. "Let us go"

"I will take two We can always put it back"

In the village the storm had left disaster and desolation worse than on our own doorstep. Uprooted trees sprawled their branches in ghastly fashion over streets and houses, flattening them and the bodies of men and women indiscriminately. Sticks and stones lay scattered wildly in angry confusion. The tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds, but the workers' huts, of more flimsy construction, had been demolished. The thatch had been ripped from some, where others stood there was now only a heap of mud with their owners' possessions studding them in a kind of pitiless decoration The corrugated iron shacks in which some of the men lived were no more: here and there we could see the

iron sheets in unexpected places — suspended from trees or blown and embedded on to the walls of houses still standing. There was water everywhere, the overflowing into the streets. Dead dogs, cats and as. cluttered the roadside, or floated starkly on the waters [illegible] blown distended bellies.

People were moving about amid this destruction, picking out a rag here, a bundle there, hugging those things they thought to be theirs, moving haltingly and with a [illegible] of despair about them. People we knew came and spoke to us in low voices, gesturing hopelessly.

"Let us go," I said "It is no good, we will come back later."

We turned back, the two rupees unspent Our children came running out to meet us, their faces bright with ho[illegible]

"The shops are closed or destroyed," I said "Go insi[illegible] I will get you some gruel presently"

Their faces faded, the two younger ones began cryi[illegible] [illegible]stlessly from hunger and disappointment I had no wo[illegible] [illegible] comfort them

At dusk the drums of calamity began, their gra[illegible] [illegible]hrobbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throug[illegible] [illegible]out the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the migh[illegible] [illegible]mpotence of our human endeavour. I listened. I cou[illegible] [illegible]ot sleep In the sound of the drums I understood a va[illegible] pervading doom, but in the expectant silences betwee[illegible] my own disaster loomed larger, more consequent, and mo[illegible] [illegible]urtful

We ventured out again when the waters had subside[illegible] [illegible] little, taking with us as before two rupees This tim[illegible] [illegible]hings were somewhat better, the streets were clear, hut[illegible] [illegible]ere going up everywhere. My spirits rose

"To Hanuman first for rice," said Nathan, excited "The [illegible]ruel we have been swallowing has been almost plain water [illegible]hese last few days."

I quickened my steps; my stomach began heaving at the [illegible]hought of food.

'he doorway of his shop. He "You have come for rice," rice. I have none to sell, enough for my wife and children."

And yet you are a merchant who deals in rice?"

And what if so? Are you not growers of it? Why do you come to me? If I have rice I do not choose ell it now; but I have told you, I have none"

We ask for only a little We will pay for what we —see, here is the money"

No, no rice, but — wait .. they say Biswas is selling .. can try ..."

'o Biswas "We come for rice Look, here is our ley."

Two rupees? How much do you think you can buy 1 two rupees?"

We thought ——"

Never mind what you thought! Is this not a time of city? Can you buy rice anywhere else? Am I not tled to charge more for that? Two ollocks I will let have and that is charity."

It is very little for two rupees ——"

Take it or leave it I can get double that sum from tanners, but because I know you ——"

'e take it, we give up the silver coins. Now there is ing left for the thatching, unless we use a rupee or two n the ten that remain in the granary

put the rice in my sari, tuck the precious load securely it the waist. We turn back. On the outskirts of the ge there is Kenny. His face is grim and long, his eyes burning in his pallid face. He sees us and comes up. You too are starving, I suppose"

tap the roll at my waist — the grains give at my touch. We have a little rice — it will last us until times are er."

Times are better, times are better," he shouts "Times not be better for many months Meanwhile er and die, you meek suffering fools

keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—out for help — do something? There is nothing in country, oh God, there is nothing!"

We shrink from his violence. What can we do—can he mean? The man is raving. We go on our wa

The paddy was completely destroyed; there would no rice until the next harvesting. Meanwhile, we live what remained of our salted fish, roots and leaves, the of the prickly pear, and on the plantains from our At last the time came for the rice terraces to be dr and got ready for the next sowing Nathan told me with cheer in his voice and I told the children, pleasu for the fields were full of fish that would feed us for a day. Then we waited, spirits lifting, eyes spark bellies painful with anticipation

At last the day. Nathan went to break the dams I with him and with me our children, sunken-eyed, as they had not been for many days at the thought o feast, carrying nets and baskets. First one hole, another, no bigger than a finger's width, until the w eroded the sides and the outlets grew large enough two fists to go through. Against them we held our feet firm and braced in the mud while the water ru away, and the fish came tumbling into them When water was all gone, there they were caught in the mu and among the paddy, shoals of them leaping madly, and silver and good to look upon We gathered them w flying fingers and greedy hearts and bore them away triumph, with a glow at least as bright as the sun on th shining scales. Then we came and gathered up what mained of the paddy and took it away to thresh a winnow.

Late that night we were still at work, cleaning the fi hulling the rice, separating the grain from the husk. Wh we had done, the rice yield was meagre — no more th two measures — all that was left of the year's harvest a the year's labour.

We ate, finding it difficult to believe we did so The
od food lay rich, if uneasy, in our starved bellies. Al-
dy the children were looking better, and at the sight
their faces, still pinched but content, a great weight
ed from me. Today we would eat and tomorrow, and for
ny weeks while the grain lasted. Then there was the
, cleaned, dried and salted away, and before that was
ie we should earn some more money; I would plant
re vegetables .such dreams, delightful, orderly, satis-
ng, but of the stuff of dreams, wraithlike And sleep,
h sleep.. deep and sweet and sound as I had not known
many nights; it claimed me even as I sat amid the rice
sks and fish scales and drying salt.

CHAPTER VIII

KUNTHI'S *two eldest sons* were among the first in the vi
to start work at the tannery, and between them
brought home more than a man's wages

"You see," said Kunthi. "The tannery is a boo
us. *Have I not said so since it began?* We are no lo
a village either, but a growing town Does it not do
good just to think of it?"

"Indeed no," said I, "for it is even as I said, and
money buys less and less As for living in a town
town this is — why, there *is nothing I* would fly from so
if I could go back to the sweet quiet of village life
it is all noise and crowds everywhere, and rude y
hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and un
behaviour, and *no man* thinks of another but schemes
for his money"

"Words and words," said Kunthi. "Stupid words
wonder they call us senseless peasant women, but I am
and never will be There is no earth in my breeding."

"*If there* were *you* would be *the* better *for it*," sa
wrathfully, "for then your values would be true."

Kunthi only shrugged her delicate shoulders and *left*
She spent a lot of her time making unnecessary jour
into the town where, with her good looks and provoca
body, she could be sure of admiration, and more, f
the young men At first the women said it and the r
said they were jealous, then men too began to notice a
remark on it and wonder why her husband did noth
'Now if *I* were in his place,' they said. . but they h
ordinary wives, not a woman with fire and beauty in h
and the skill to use them · besides which, he was a qu
dull man.

"Let her be," said Janaki "She is a trollop, and
anxious only that there should be a supply of *men*"

Her voice held both anger and a bitter hopelessness: r a long time now her husband's shop had been doing idly. He was unable to compete with the other bigger iopkeepers whom the easy money to be had from the nners had drawn to the new town

A few days after our conversation the shop finally closed wn Nobody asked 'Where do you go from here?' hey did not say, 'What is to become of us?' We waited, id one day they came to bid us farewell, carrying their ossessions, with their children trailing behind, all but the dest, whom the tannery had claimed Then they were one, and the shopkeepers were glad that there was less ompetition, and the worker who moved into their hut as pleased to have a roof over his head, and we remembered em for a while and then took up our lives again

It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery It grew id flourished and spread Not a month went by but somedy's land was swallowed up, another building appeared ight and day the tanning went on A never-ending line carts brought the raw material in — thousands of skins, oat, calf, lizard and snake skins — and took them away gain tanned, dyed and finished It seemed impossible that narkets could be found for such quantities — or that so any animals existed — but so it was, incredibly

The officials of the tannery had increased as well Apart rom the white man we had first seen — who owned the annery and lived by himself — there were some nine or en Muslims under him They formed a little colony of heir own, living midway between the town and open country n brick cottages with whitewashed walls and red-tiled roofs. The men worked hard, some of them until late at night, he women — well, they were a queer lot, and their way of ife was quite different from ours. What they did in their ouses I do not know, for they employed servants to do the ork; but they stayed mostly indoors or if they went out t all they went veiled in bourkas It was their religion, was told: they would not appear before any man but heir husband Sometimes, when I caught sight of a figure

in voluminous draperies swishing through the streets a blazing sun, or of a face peering through a window shutter, I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool br upon their flesh, of walking out light and free, or of with men and working beside them.

"They have their compensations," Kali said drily. is an easy life, with no worry for the next meal and pl always at hand. I would gladly wear a bourka and veiled for the rest of my life if I, too, could be sure such things"

"For a year perhaps," I said, "not for ever Who c endure such a filtering of sunlight and fresh air as *do?*"

"You chatter like a pair of monkeys," said Kali's band, "with less sense. What use to talk of 'excha and so forth? Their life is theirs and yours is yours, ne change nor exchange *is possible.*"

Once, and once only, I actually saw one of those wor close. I was taking a few vegetables to market whe aw her beckoning me to come indoors. I did so, and oon as the door was closed the woman threw off her he better to select what she wanted. Her face was ale, the bones small and fine. Her eyes were pale curious light brown matching her silky hair She t hat she wanted and paid me. Her fingers, fair and slend ere laden with jewelled rings, any one of which would h d us for a year She smiled at me as I went out, th uickly lowered the veil again about her face. I never w here again. There was something about those closed do nd shuttered windows that struck coldly at me, used as as to open fields and the sky and the unfettered sight of t in.

CHAPTER IX

NE morning I was pounding some red chillies into powder. *Cho-chup!* went the pestle into the mortar, ishing the brittle chillies and the seeds in them. Each ne it fell, a fine, red dust rose up, spreading a rich, id smell in the air. A pleasant smell, hot and pungent, ich made my nostrils water and squirted the tears into 'eyes, so that every few minutes I had to stop to wipe m. It was a fine, peaceful morning, not a sound from tannery, which for one blessed day in the week closed wn completely Each time I paused I could hear sparrows ttering, and the thin, clear note of a minah.

Into view on the horizon came two figures, moving very owly. I went on with my pounding The figures grew ger every time I looked up, and then when they were ll a fair distance away I recognised my daughter. I had en her only once since her marriage, and since then over year had passed Excited, I gathered up the chilli powder d put it away, rinsed my eyes, washed my face and came it. On the doorstep I traced out a colam, a pattern in hite rice flour to welcome them

They approached slowly, as if their feet were somehow eighted, not with the lightness which should have brought em quickly to my side. 'Something is wrong,' I thought. Young people should not walk thus.' And when I saw heir faces the words of welcome I had ready died un-ttered.

In silence Ira knelt at my feet I raised her up quietly, with hammering heart. "Let us go in," I said. "You nust be tired."

Ira entered obediently. Her husband stood stiffly outside. 'Come," I said again, "sit and rest for a while. You have travelled a long way"

"Mother-in-law," he said, "I intend no discourtesy, this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daug marriage. I have brought her back to you She is a woman."

"You have not been married long," I said with dry "She may be as I was, she may yet conceive"

"I have waited five years," he replied. "She has borne in her first blooming, who can say she will co later? I need sons"

I summoned Nathan from the fields. The tale wa peated, our son-in-law departed.

"I do not blame him," Nathan said. "He is just for a man needs children. He has been patient"

"Not patient enough," I said. "Not patient like beloved."

Ira was sitting with her face in her arms. She l up as her father and I came in and her mouth n a little, loosely, as if she had no control over her lips was lovely still, but strain and hopelessness had shad her eyes and lined her forehead She seemed almo back away as I went to her.

"Leave me alone, Mother. I have seen this comin a long time The reality is much easier to bear than imaginings. At least now there is no more fear, no necessity for lies and concealment"

"There should never have been," I said "Are we your parents? Did you think we would blame you for is not your fault?"

"There are others," she replied "Neighbours, wo ...and I a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a chi

All this I had gone through — the torment, the anxi Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, an was my daughter this time

"Hush," I said "We are all in God's hands, and is merciful."

My thoughts went to Kenny. He can help, I thoug surely he can do something. My crushed spirit revived little.

About this time Arjun was in his early teens. He was
ll for his age and older than his years I had taught
m the little I knew of reading and writing; now he could
ave taught me and most other people in the town. I do
ot know how he did it, for we could not afford to send
im to school or to buy him books. Yet he always had
book or two by him, about which he grew vague if I asked
uestions, and spent many hours writing on scraps of paper
e collected, or even, when he had none, on the bare earth
ecretly I was glad, for I saw my father in him, although
metimes my husband worried that he showed no inclina-
on for the land; but when one day he told me he was
ing to work in the tannery I was acutely dismayed. It
emed it was going to be neither the one thing nor the
her, neither land nor letters, which was to claim him.

"You are young," I attempted to dissuade him. "Be-
des, you are not of the caste of tanners. What will our
lations say?"

"I do not know," he said. "I do not care. The im-
portant thing is to eat."

How heartless are the young! One would have thought
rom his words we had purposely starved him, when in
ct of what there was he always got the biggest share after
y husband.

"So," I said, "we do not do enough for you. These
[illegible] They do not make good
[illegible]

[illegible] e said "It is not enough.
[illegible] ired of seeing my brothers
[illegible] especially since Ira came
to live with us"

"You would grudge your own sister a mouthful," I cried,
who eats half what I give her so that you boys can have
the more!"

"The more reason for me to earn," rejoined Arjun. "I
do not grudge food to her or to you. I am only concerned
that there is so little."

He was right of course. The harvests had been very . shop prices were higher than ever.

"Well," I said. "Go if you must. You speak li man although you are a child still. But I do not k whether you can obtain work at the tannery. People they have all the labour they want"

"Kunthi's son will help me," he replied "He has mised."

I did not want to be indebted to Kunthi, or to her She was so different from us, sly and secretive, with a f *contemptuous air about her which in her son was* t almost to insolence. He had inherited her looks too, an *knowledge of it lay in his bold eyes. A handsome, swag* youth, not for my son.

"There is no need to go through him," I said letermination "I will ask Kenny to help you. Whit have power."

"*Indeed they have*," he said bitterly "*Over men vents, and especially over women*"

"What do you mean?" I said to him "Speak w lain tongue or not at all"

He looked at me obliquely with darkening eyes, but r ay no more.

A few days later he began working at the tannery, efore long Thambi, my second son, had joined him wo of them had been very close to each other from arliest years, and it was not strange that Thambi sh ollow his brother Nathan and I both tried to diss im, but without avail My husband especially had i ooking forward to the day when they would join him orking on the land, but Thambi only shook his hea

"If it were your land, or mine," he said, "I would w ith you gladly. But what profit to labour for another et so little in return? Far better to turn away from s njustice."

Nathan said not a word There was a crushed *look ab* im which spoke of the deep hurt he had *suffered* m han any words could have done He had always

own his own land, through the years there had been the ˈpe, growing fainter with each year, each child, that one ıy he would be able to call a small portion of land his ʼn. Now even his sons knew it would never be. Like 's brother before him, Thambi had found the cruellest ɔrds of any.

Yet they were good sons, considerate of us, patient with ˈhers, always giving us a fair share of their earnings. ith their money we began once again to live well In e granary, unused for so long, I stored away half a bag rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chillies. ithherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay the rent the land ; now we were enabled to keep some of our own oduce I was especially pleased that I had not been rced to sell all the chillies, for these are useful to us ; ıen the tongue rebels against plain boiled rice, desiring ee and salt and spices which one cannot afford, the sharp e of a chillie renders even plain rice palatable. I was le at last to thatch our hut again, substantially, with o or three bindings of leaves For the first time in years bought clothes for the older children, a sari for myself, d although he protested I bought for my husband a dhoti hich he badly needed, since the other was in rags and irely covered his loins Both he and I had the garments e had worn at our daughter's marriage, but these we never ought of wearing · whatever hardships our day-to-day ing might have, we were determined not to disgrace our ms on the day of their weddings.

CHAPTER X

DEEPAVALI, the Festival of Lights, approached. It is festival mainly for the children, but of course ev one who can takes part I twisted cotton into w soaked them in oil and placed them in mud saucers to be lit at night. To the children I handed out two apiece, to be spent on fireworks I had never been able do so before — in previous years we had contented ourse with watching other people's fireworks, or with going to the bonfire in the village, and even now I felt qu about wasting money on such quickly spent pleasures; their rapturous faces overcame my misgivings 'It is once,' I thought, 'a memory'

As it grew dark we lit the tapers and wicks and circled our dwelling with light A feathery breeze stirring, setting the flames leaping and dancing, their flections in the black glistening oil cavorting too In town and in the houses nearby, hundreds of small bea were beginning to flash, now and then a rocket would into the sky, break and pour out its riches like preci jewels into the darkness As the night went on, the crac and spit of exploding fireworks increased The children b bought boxes of coloured matches and strings of patt and a few pice worth of crackers, like small nuts, wh split in two with a loud bang amid a shower of sparks wh lit. The last were the most popular — the boys pranc round shrieking with laughter and throwing the crack about everywhere, yet they were nimble enough to skip o of harm's way. All except Selvam, the youngest. He sto a safe distance away, legs apart and obviously ready run, holding a stick of sugarcane nearly as tall as hims which he had bought instead of fireworks.

"Go and play," I said to him "Deepavali comes

ice a year and this is the first time we have bought fire-
orks. Do not lose the opportunity."

"I am afraid," he said frankly, his small face serious

After we had eaten, and rather well, and there were
crackers left, and the oil in the saucers had run dry,
walked to the town. Selvam refused to come He was
stubborn child; I knew it was useless to try and per-
iade him Ira stayed behind too, saying she preferred
stay with him I think she was glad of the excuse he
rovided, for since her return she had not cared to be
en about, and of course there would be a large crowd
the town Villagers from all round, like us, were con-
rging towards the bonfire to be lit there, already smoke
isps were curling towards the clouds, torches were be-
nning to flare The smell of oil was everywhere, heavy
id pungent, exciting the senses Our steps quickened
uicker and quicker, greedy, wanting to encompass every-
ing, to miss not one iota of pleasure Then as happens
en in the brightest moment, I remembered Janaki Last
ear she had come with us, she and her children This
ear who knew — or cared? The black thought momen-
rily doused the glow within me, then, angered and indig-
ant, I thrust the intruder away, chasing it, banishing it.
red of gloom, reaching desperately for perfection of delight,
hich can surely never be

There was a great noise everywhere Men, women and
hildren from the tannery and the fields had come out,
any of them in new clothes such as we too had donned,
e girls and women with flowers in their hair and glass
angles at their wrists and silver rings on their toes, and
ose who could afford it wore silver golsu clasped round
eir ankles and studded belts around their waists

In the centre of the town the bonfire was beginning to
moulder. For many weeks the children had been collecting
rewood, rags, leaves and brushwood, and the result was
huge pile like an enormous ant-hill, into which the flames
te fiercely, hissing and crackling and rearing up as

on the bits of camphor and oil-soaked rags that y-
threw in.

In the throng I lost Nathan and the boys, or
they lost me — at any rate we got separated I
my way through the crush, thus way and that, n
giving an inch, in my efforts to find them; and in th
I had to give up Before long, in the heat and excit
I forgot them. Drums had begun to beat, the fir
blazing fiercely, great long orange tongues consumi
fuel and thrusting upwards and sometimes outwards
to engulf the watchers. As each searching flame l
round, the crowd leaned away from its grasp, straigh
as the wind and the flames changed direction; so that
was a constant swaying movement like the waving of
grasses. The heat was intense — faces gleamed ruddy
firelight, one or two women had drawn their saris
their eyes

Leaping, roaring to climax, then the strength
from fury, a quietening. Slowly, one by one, the fl
gave up their colour and dropped, until at last there
none left — only a glowing heap, ashen-edged. The d
beats died to a murmur The scent of jasmine flo
mingled with the fumes of camphor and oil, and a
smell, that of toddy, which several of the men had
drinking — many to excess, for they were lurching a
loud-mouthed and more than ordinarily merry. I lo
about for my family and at last saw my husband.
seemed to have gone mad. He had one son seated on
shoulders and one son at each hip, and was bounding ab
on the fringes of the crowd to the peril of my children
the amusement of the people I fought my way to h
"Have you taken leave of your senses?" I cried out ab
the din.

"No; only of my cares," he shouted gaily, capering abo
with the children clinging delightedly to him. "Do you f
feel joy in the air?"

He sounded so light of heart I could not help smilin

"I feel nothing," I said, going up to him. "Perhaps is the toddy that makes the feeling."

"Not a drop," he said, coming up to me. "Smell!"

"You are too tall — I cannot," I replied

"Lift her up," somebody yelled, and a dozen voices reated the cry: "Lift her up, lift her up!"

My husband looked at me solemnly. "I will," he said, d dropping his sons he seized me and swung me high in front of all those people Several of the women were ighing at him indulgently, the children were twittering with asure.

"Whatever will they say," I said, my face burning as let me down again "At our age too! You ought to ashamed!"

"That I am not," he said, winking, to the vast delight the onlookers "I am happy because life is good and children are good, and you are the best of all."

What more could I say after that?

Nathan sang loudly all the way back He was in high irits. The children, tired out, clumped along in silence, e youngest with frequent pleas to be carried; and when took no notice he began snuffling

It was a very hot night — Selvam and Ira were sleeping it in the open, in the small square in front of our hut hich I had swept and washed with dung that morning. he others stretched themselves out and were asleep alost as they lay down Nathan had lost none of his good amour. He seemed very wide awake I stretched myself it beside him, close to him in the darkness, and as we uched he turned abruptly towards me. Words died away, le listening air was very still, the black night waited. In le straining darkness I felt his body moving with desire, is hands on me were trembling, and I felt my senses opening e a flower to his urgency. I closed my eyes and waited, aited in the darkness while my being filled with a wild, cstatic fluttering, waited for him to come to me.

CHAPTER XI

ONE of my husband's male relatives had died and had to attend the funeral. When he had gone I t the opportunity of going to see Kenny. I had not d so before because I was sure Nathan would not lik wife or his daughter going to a white man, a forei My father had been different — but Nathan, I felt, w not approve. And if he did not, the one chance Ira h would be lost, and this made it the more important he should not know I explained this to Ira cautio and she nodded listlessly and said yes, it was a neces precaution, but she did not look at me and she sho no enthusiasm I was getting more and more worried a her: she moped about, dull of hair and eye, as if the sw ness of life had departed — as indeed it has for a wo who is abandoned by her husband.

Kenny was working in the small building they had up near the tannery. I could see him whenever the d opened to let someone out. There was a long line of waiting; I squatted some distance away The day w on. The sun had set, the glow of twilight was touch with darkness, before he came out He looked grim a tired, his eyes were burning, there was an air of such i personal cruelty about him that despite myself I shivered.

"No more tonight," he said briefly to the assembled pe and stepping down from the verandah he strode away I waited till the crowd dispersed, then I followed. He w walking quickly with long strides, I had to run to catch u He stopped at last when he heard my footsteps and wait or me to come up, frowning so that I began to feel afra

"I said no more tonight. Did you not hear me? ou think I am made of iron?"

"I waited all day," I gasped "I must see you.

lis frown deepened. He said coldly, "You people will
:r learn. It is pitiful to see your foolishness"

It is for my daughter I come," I said. "She cannot
'; she is as I was."

You will be a mother even before she is," he replied
a glimmer of a smile, "for it seems you have no
culty."

It is so," I said. "I would it were otherwise and she
ny condition, for she is much afflicted since her husband
no use for her."

Why did she not come then," he said, "since it is her
l? It would have been more sensible."

here was an edge to his voice, and his mouth twisted
in exasperation

Forgive me," I whispered, quaking, "I was not sure—"
o my surprise, he put both hands on my shoulders,
ing me to look at him, and I saw he was laughing.

I am sorry I frightened you," he said "You should
act like a timid calf at your age As for your daughter,
ill do what I can—but remember, no promises."

le turned and was gone I sat down to think, and to
ect my wits. When at last I rose to go, a full moon
shining, golden and enormous, very low in the sky.
le went ... t to the narrow foot-
walking swiftly and

alling my name from
itting out wildly at
breast, and then I saw it was Kunthi, standing where
path forked with the moonlight streaming full down
her.

"You startled me," I said, "I did not expect——"

"That I can see," she said coolly, coming towards me.
ou keep late hours, Rukmani."

"No later than yours," I replied, not liking her tone
have my reasons."

"Of course," she said softly, derision in her voice. "We
have reasons."

"Mine are not the same as yours," I said with surveying her. She came very close, so close that I the rose petals in her hair, saw the paint on her

"Meaning?"

"That we live differently. It is charitable to say so Let me pass."

She stood squarely in my path. "I would not thought it," she said slowly, "had I not seen for

"Thought what," I said "Seen what?"

"That you have so much passion in your body," said insolently, "that you seek assuagement thus husband would give much to know where you have tonight."

I saw her mouth forming these words, her eyes hooded and mocking, then I saw her face suddenly to mine and did not realise I had thrown myself a until I felt her body in my grip An overwhelming possessed me, I kept shaking her furiously, I coul top. Her slender body was no match for mine. I er head fall back, the thin sari she wore slipped fror houlders Then I saw that it was not tied at the ut below the navel, like a strumpet's, and that she aked below Sandalwood paste smeared her swelling Inder her breasts were dark painted shadows which iem sensuous depth, the nipples were tipped with red I released her. She stood there before me panting, er hair shaken loose and coiling about her shoulders

"Guard your tongue," I said, "or it will be the w r you."

She said nothing for a moment, while she rearranged irments, recovering herself a little, then once again addening, insulting half-smile curved her lips.

"And for you," she said, with knives in her voice, r your precious husband"

With that she was gone.

I went alone to summon my daughter's husband.

"Take her back," I said "There is nothing er now, she will bear you many sons yet."

I would," he replied, with a hint of sorrow in his eyes, r she was a good wife to me, and a comely one, but I e waited long and now I have taken another woman" went away. Ira was waiting, eagerness shining from

You must not blame him," I said "He has taken her woman"

he said not a word. I repeated what I had said, for seemed not to understand, but she only looked at me with ly eyes

Thereafter her ways became even more strange She spent hours out in the country by herself, spoke little, with- completely into herself and went about her tasks with dull hopelessness that daunted me. No one could see her now the warm lovely creature she had been except etimes when Selvam came to her, perching on her lap coaxing a smile from her, for she always had a special for him. As my pregnancy advanced she turned com- ely away from me. Sometimes I saw her looking at with brooding, resentful eyes, and despite myself I ld not help wondering if hatred lay behind her glance.

Then at last my child was born, a nicely formed boy, aller than the others had been, but of course I was er now. We nicknamed him Kuti, which means tiny, being a happy, untroublesome baby everybody took asure in his arrival. None more so than Ira the trans- mation in her was astonishing as it was inexplicable. I d feared she might dislike the child, but now it was if he were her own. She lost her dreary air, her face ame animated, the bloom of youth came back to her.

"Our daughter is herself again," said Nathan to me. "I ve heard her carolling like a bird."

"She is happy with the child," I replied, "but I do not ow what is to become of her in the future"

"Always worrying," he chided. "Is it not a mercy that e is young again, should one not be grateful?"

He was a man and did not understand. How could I p worrying? We had no money to leave her. Who

would look after her when we were gone and the b were married with families of their own? With a it was perhaps possible she might marry again, it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and barren.

No one had been more upset about the outcome of marriage than Old Granny. It was she who had the match, and though failing in health she thought it duty to come to me. She had aged considerably since last time I had seen her. She walked slowly, before each step to gather strength for the next; her kept up a slight, shuddering movement like the flutter of a bee on a flower.

"No fault of yours, or the girl's or her husband's told her. "It is Fate. Nevertheless, I do not like to of the future"

"Why fear?" said the old lady. "Am I not alone, do I not manage?"

I thought of her sitting in the street all day long the gunny-sacking in front of her piled with a few worth of nuts and vegetables; and I thought of Ira the same thing, and I was silent

"It is not unbearable," said she, watching me with shrewd eyes. "One gets used to it"

It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got to the noise and the smell of the tannery, they no affected me I had seen the slow, calm beauty of village wilt in the blast from the town, and I grieved more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself bellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm.

CHAPTER XII

ONE day in each week, when the tannery stopped work, Arjun and Thambi would help their father on the land, and this gave Nathan great pleasure. He liked to see his sons beside him, to teach them the ways of the earth: how to sow; to transplant; to reap; to know the wholesome from the rotten, the unwelcome reed from the paddy; and how to irrigate or drain the terraces. In all these matters he had no master, and I think it helped him to know he could impart knowledge to his sons, more skilled though they were in other things, and able to read and write better than any in the town.

The rest of the week they worked at the tannery, going there soon after daybreak and not coming back until it was dark. *By the time they had entered their late teens* they were earning good wages: a rupee for each day's work, and without fail they would hand me their earnings, keeping nothing back for gaming or whoring as many of the lads did. Each morning I cooked rice for them, sometimes dhal or vegetables as well, which they took with them to eat at midday; and when they came home I gave them rice-water and dried fish, sometimes a little buttermilk or perhaps even a few plantains I had kept from selling. But from what they gave me I had also to buy clothes for them, for they were expected to put on shirts over their loin-cloths, and red turbans on their heads, so that although we had full bellies and were well clothed there was not much left over, and the hope I secretly cherished of putting by some money for Ira soon withered; and when it finally died I recovered my peace of mind and was happy enough.

If there was nothing to be done in the fields, Nathan would accompany *me when I went to market. This* happened so seldom that it was always an occasion, and to round it off we would go to the tannery to see

Of course ours was not the only family involved were several others, among them Kali's, and she ca bemoan the result.

"Two more mouths to feed," she complained. " one of my three sons had the sense to go back. I do know what is to become of us, for the land cannot us all. So much for reading and writing," she said, a me with eye and finger "Did I not say no good come of it? Now look into what mess your sons led us!"

"Ay, and out of it to better things," said Thambi, flint in his voice, "but for spawn like yours who have themselves cheaper than dirt"

"You will speak with respect," I cried, "or else

Then Nathan interrupted, so violently that I started "Enough!" he shouted. "More than enough has said. Our children must act as they choose to, not our benefit. Is it not enough that they suffer?"

The veins on his forehead were bulging I had never him so angry before. Kali went away. Then the men too, father and sons, leaving me alone who had no un standing.

Once more Nathan was sole provider for us, and we f he good living we had known. The reserves of grai had put by began to dwindle despite my care. Fortunat harvest time was near, and I consoled myself with hought of it.

Arjun and Thambi began to frequent the town more nore, coming and going at all hours with no word as what they did, and I suffered it in silence, for I knew t had no money to lead them to harm, and I had no or the restlessness that afflicted them.

One morning I was laying out some clothes to dry in un when Selvam came running in, his face hot and

"Tom-toms are beating," he announced breathlessly. " own is full of drummers, they are calling for men."

I stopped my work and gazed at him, and all at ny heart turned over. It was as if a scene long past

urring again — this was not Selvam but Arjun, and he
bringing
and over

ing, eager
repeated
,' interest
I was forgotten.

Vhen they had gone — a triumphant Selvam in the van and the place was quiet, I did indeed hear the drums, fled and distant, insistently calling. 'Well,' I thought. it concerns me I shall hear soon enough, and if not I ll have saved myself a walk.' So with ordinary things ught to still my qualms.

They are calling for labourers," Arjun said, not looking "It would be a good opportunity for us."

nly Arjun and Thambi, who had stayed in the town l nightfall, and my husband and I, were up. The others e long asleep.

They are paying well," Arjun resumed. "It would be d for us to work again It is not fitting that men should upt themselves in hunger and idleness"

I have heard," said Nathan, "that labour is required you not here, but in the island of Ceylon."

Yes. It is work in the tea plantations of Ceylon"

You may not have the knowledge for such work."

They will teach us — they have said so"

Who will pay for the journey — is it not one of many idreds of miles?"

'True They will arrange everything, and everything will paid for."

So Nathan was silenced, for he saw they were men and l made their decisions, but how could I let them go, o were my own flesh and blood, without a fight?

'Promises," I said. "Fair words Who is to see if honoured? What is to happen if they are

'They need labour," Arjun said drily. "Self

ll keep these promises."

her than two days' journeying, and that it is a good se that takes him? Kenny himself has assured you hat — you should be grateful that he has recommended son."

I am indeed," I said, flat and dispirited "He has e much for us."

You brood too much," Nathan said, "and think only our trials, not of the joys that are still with us. Look ur land — is it not beautiful? The fields are green and grain is ripening It will be a good harvest year, there be plenty."

le coaxed me out into the sunlight and we sat down ther on the brown earth that was part of us, and we d at the paddy fields spreading rich and green before and they were indeed beautiful. The air was cool and yet the paddy caught what little movement there was, ing slightly one way and the next with soft whispering ne time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between young shoots for our fish, and paddy birds; and somes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingoes, ding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with mage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no e, for the tannery lay close — except crows and kites and h scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal, or somees a pal-pitta, skimming past with raucous cry but never pping, perhaps dropping a blue-black feather in flight to ight the children.

Nathan went and plucked a few green stems and brought m to me "See how firm and strong they are — no sign disease at all And look, the grain is already forming"

I took the paddy from him and parted the grass and re within its protective husk lay the rice-grain, just big ugh to see, white, perfect, and holding in itself our lives.

"It promises a good harvest," he repeated eagerly.

"We shall be able to pay the landlord, and eat, and rhaps even put by a little. We may even make visit our son — would not that be good?"

among you when my spirit wills it...I go when I am of your follies and stupidities, your eternal, shameful ty. I can only take you people," he said, "in small ."

was silent, taking no offence Barbed words, but what r from one so gentle? Harsh talk from one in whom prings of tenderness gushed abundant, as I knew.

told you what I did, in a moment of lunacy," he "I do not want it repeated."

am not cursed with a gossip's tongue," I said, annoyed could not repeat what you have said"

Never. Understand?"

understand."

rose to his feet and without another word was gone, ing with long, quick strides and stooping a little as ys A strange nature, only partly within my underding. A man half in shadow, half in light, defying vledge.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT year the rains failed. A week went by.
We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indiffer
our need. We threw ourselves on the earth and we p
I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my God
and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me
compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain
"Perhaps tomorrow," my husband said. "It is not
late."

We went out and scanned the heavens, clear and
tiful, deadly beautiful, not one cloud to mar its se
Others did so too, coming out, as we did, to gaze a
sky and murmur, 'Perhaps tomorrow'

Tomorrows came and went and there was no rain N
no longer said perhaps, only a faint spark of hope,
nately refusing to die, brought him out each dawn to
the heavens for a sign

Each day the level of the water dropped and the
of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a t
the well was as dry as a bone Before long the shoo
the paddy were tipped with brown, even as we wa
the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking ou
green that meant life to us

Harvesting time, and nothing to reap The paddy
taken all our labour and lay now before us in faded,
less heaps.

Sivaji came to collect his master's dues and his
fell when he saw how much was lost, for he was a good
and he felt for us.

"There is nothing this year," Nathan said to him. "
even gleanings, for the grain was but little advanced."

"You have had the land," Sivaji said, "for which
have contracted to pay · so much money, so much ·
These are just dues, I must have them Would you
me return empty handed?"

athan's shoulders sagged. He looked tired and dispirited me and stood beside him Ira and the boys crouched us, defensively.

There is nothing," Nathan repeated "Do you not see crops are dead? There has been no rain and the river ty."

Yet such was the contract else the land would not have rented to you."

What would you have me do? The last harvest was gre; we have nothing saved"

vaji looked away. "I do not know It is your con- I must do as I am bid."

What then?"

The land is to be given to another if you cannot make ment."

Go from the land after all these years? Where would go? How would we live?"

It is your concern I have my orders and must obey h."

athan stood there sweating and trembling

Give me time," he said at last humbly, "until the next I will pay then, somehow"

Pay half now," Sivaji said, "and I will try and do as wish" He spoke quickly, as if to give himself no e to repent of his offer, and hurried away even before my band had assented

No easy job for him," I said "He is answerable, even we are."

That is why he and his kind are employed," Nathan d bitterly. "To protect their overlords from such un- asant tasks Now the landlord can wring from us his neys and care not for the misery he evokes, for indeed would be difficult for any man to see another starve and wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born such travail."

He went into the hut and I followed. A few mud pots d two brass vessels, the tin trunk I had
as

"It is for you to make the offer."

"Tell me first how much you want and I will see what I ı do"

"Enough to pay the land dues."

"How much is that?"

"It is my business."

He was silent for a while, and I said to him exasperated, Tell me if you are not prepared to buy and I will go ewhere."

"Always in haste," he rebuked me in that gentle, oily ice of his. "Yet I think this time you will have to ait my pleasure, Rukmani."

"What do you mean?" I said, ruffled. "There are ny who would be pleased to buy such good material."

"I think not," he said "I think not. For, you see, the yes of other men have come to me, even as you have, d have gone away as you threaten, yet they have to he back to me because nobody else can afford to buy these hard times"

"As no doubt you can," I said with contempt, and then inspiration came to me and I went on: "Unless you y a fair price I shall take these saris elsewhere There the Muslim wife of a tannery official whom I know, and e will buy from me as she has done before."

"Indeed," he said, a little disconcerted. "Well, Rukani, since we have done business for a long time, and cause you are a woman of spirit whom I have long lmired, I will give you thirty rupees. Nobody could be irer."

"Fairer by far," I retorted. "I will not take one pie ıder seventy-five rupees. Take it or not as you please."

I put the clothes away, making a pretence of going to e door. I hoped he would call me back, for in truth I d not know where else to turn, but if not—well, thirty ipees was too far from our needs to be of use, and if I d not get what I asked I might as well keep the saris.

"Let us only try," I said with the sobs coming fast. Let us keep our hope for a next harvest."

"Very well, very well," Nathan exclaimed "Let us try y all means. We may be kicked for our pains, but what f that! Anything to stop your wailing Now go, do not ross me further."

'He is worried,' I thought, smothering my sobs. 'He is istracted and does not mean to be harsh'

I went inside and lay down, with the money tied to my ody, and at last dozed off into a troubled sleep.

In the morning Sivaji came, and my husband took the oney and counted it out in front of him

"One hundred and twenty-five rupees," he said "Not alf what we owe, but the best we can do without selling e seed for the next sowing"

"It would raise only a few rupees" I pleaded. "Let us keep it, and we will repay you twofold"

"It is not for me," Sivaji answered "You make payment to another What shall I say to him that I bring little? You made promise of half"

"Give us a little grace," Nathan said, dragging the words t. "We will make full repayment and over after the ext harvesting"

So we stood and argued and begged, and in the end ivaji agreed to wait He took the money and turned to s, then he hesitated and said, a little wistfully·

"What I do I must, for I must think of my own. . . do not wish to be hard. May you prosper."

"May you prosper too," I whispered, hardly able to speak, r his words had left me defenceless. "May the Gods ve you their blessing." And so he departed

The drought continued until we lost count of the time. ay after day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching what- [illegible] h hard until

of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and
blistering sunlight.

In the town a water reservoir had been built fo
tannery workers and their families, but now others
allowed a limited quantity as well So thither I jou
every morning, and, when I said how many we were, p
half a mud-pot would be doled out, sometimes a little
depending upon who was in charge. Then some
women in their greed began to claim to have more c
than they had, and non-existent relatives, and then
jealousies and spite and bitter argument. Until at
was decreed that each person must come in his own
only, not for others, even children and old men, and t
an h
mar

T ind
and our hopes had shrivelled with the paddy — to
to do any good — then we saw the storm clouds gat
and before long the rain came lashing down, making
fury for the long drought and giving the grateful l
much as it could suck and more But in us ther
nothing left — no joy, no call for joy. It had come to

CHAPTER XIV

soon as the rains were over, and the cracks in the earth had healed, and the land was moist and ready, took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet eceive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made sowing

Vhen a few weeks had gone by, the seed sprouted; ler shoots appeared, thrusting upwards with increasing ngth, and soon we were able to transplant the seedlings by one, and at first they stood out singly, slender, hulous spires with spaces between: but grew and grew soon were merged into one thick green field of rustling dy. In that field, in the grain which had not yet begun orm, lay our future and our hope

Iope, and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in direction and then in another, and which was the nger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, it was always with us Fear, constant companion of peasant Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should relax Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. ir; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of iger; fear of the blackness of death.

Long before the paddy ripened we came to the end of our ed-fish stocks. There was no money left — every pie d gone to pay the land dues Nothing left to sell. Nothing be had from my efforts, for the vines and vegetables had hered in the long weeks of drought.

At last no option but to draw upon my secret hoard: small stock of rice, ten ollocks in all, shielded from every nptation to sell or barter, kept even when the need to ld our land had squeezed us dry of everything else. Now brought it out and measured it again, ten ollocks exactly. ien I divided it into several equal portions, each of the rtions as little as would suffice for one day, and counted

the portions of which there were twenty-four, so that nearly a month we would not starve. For a long tim hesitated, wondering whether we could do with less, making thirty divisions, but finally, I decided against it, Kuti was already ailing, and we needed to preserve strength for the harvest.

'For at least twenty-four days we shall eat,' I thou 'At the end of that time — well, we are in God's ha He will not fail us' Sometimes I thought that, and other times I was seized with trembling and was fright not knowing where to turn.

The nights were always the worst, and not for me al Peace then seemed to forsake our hut and I could my husband and children moving restlessly in their and muttering, whether from hunger or fear I do not k Once Nathan cried out loudly and sprang up in his I went to him, and he woke then and clung to me.

"Only a dream," I said. "Sleep, my dear one."

"A nightmare," he said sweating. "I saw the p turned to straw, the grain lost .. Oh God, all was

His voice was stark, bereft of the power of dissem which full consciousness brings

"Never fear," I said with false courage lest panic sh swoop down on us "*All will be well*"

He composed himself for sleep again

"You are a good wife," he murmured. "I would have any other"

I drifted at last into uneasy sleep, and dreamt m evil dreams, and in one I saw a shadowy figure with face creeping into our hut and bearing away the ten ol of rice. I knew it was but the result of an over-burde spirit, but the following night I had the same dream. the days passed I found myself growing increasingly su cious. Except for my family, I trusted no one. Only night when there were no passers-by, did I feel comple safe. Then I would bring out the rice, and measure and run the grain through my fingers for sheer love of fondling it like a simpleton. When I had taken out

otted portion for the next day I would bury the
mainder, one half, tied in a white cloth, in a hole I dug
e distance from our hut, the other half in our granary.
Several times I thought of going to Kenny, and twice
did go He would have helped us, of that I am sure,
each time I was told he had gone away the townfolk
not see him for many weeks. I would have gone again
again, but I had not my full strength; it was no longer
y to walk to the town and back. We might have
rowed from Biswas, but there was nothing left to pledge;
any event, we would not have been able even to pay the
rest he demanded

Seven days went by and seven precious portions of rice
e eaten. On the eighth day Kunthi came as I was
king the rice-water

I had not set eyes on her for a considerable time—
since the day I had seen her in her nakedness, and
had changed so much I scarcely recognised her. I gazed
er hardly believing The skin of her face was stiff and
y as if from overstretching, elsewhere it showed folds
[illegible] her breasts hung loose;
[illegible] had been her pride and
[illegible] not a vestige remained.
ell,' I thought. 'All women come to it sooner or later
has come off perhaps worse than most'

"Sit and rest awhile," I said "What brings you hither?"

She made no answer, but walked to the pot on the fire
d looked in.

"You eat well," she said. "Better than most."

"Not well. We eat, that is all"

"You still have your husband?"

"Why, yes," I said staring at her, not quite taking her
eaning "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "I have lost mine. I wondered how you
ad fared."

'Poor thing,' I thought. 'She has suffered' I looked at
her pityingly.

"I do not want your pity," she said savagely, ' ' my husband. He is alive and well—he is ' ' another."

I thought of her husband, slow, sturdy, dependable, ra like an ox, and I could not believe it of him; then I tho of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted mouth scented thighs that had held so many men, and I wond if after all these years he had not at last found out a her. 'Perhaps the truth has been forced upon him thought, looking at her with suspicion, and I gazed a upon that ravaged beauty.

"Stare your fill," she said scornfully. "You ha lacked graces, Rukmani."

I averted my eyes hastily. I hardly knew what to

"I have come," she continued, "nor to be seen, or t you, but for a meal. I have not eaten *for a long time*

I went to the pot and stirred it, scooped out a placed it in a bowl, handed it to her She swallowed it q and put the bowl down.

"I must have some rice too. I cannot come ever ...as it is I have waited a long time to make sure you alone."

"There is no rice to be given away," I said. "I think of my husband and children. These are not of plenty."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I will have some. damage will never be repaired whilst I hunger. The no life for me until I am whole again"

'She is mad,' I thought. 'She believes what she s does not realise there is no going back for her.'

"Listen," I said, "there is none, or very little. D our rice-water, come here daily, but do not ask for I have a daughter and sons, even as you have, to cons What I have belongs to us all. Can you not go to sons?"

"My sons," she said, looking at me speculatively, " not mine alone." Seeing my bewilderment she added, "T have wives. I would never approach them now."

What are sons for——" I began.

Not to beg from," she interrupted with a flicker of tempt. "I can look after myself; but first the bloom st come back."

was mute: I had said all there was to say and now re was nothing more.

Well," she said, breaking the silence, and with an edge her voice. "How much longer have I to wait?"

he came close to me and put her face near mine. I the grey, drawn flesh and the hooded eyes, deep sunken heir sockets, and I made to turn away but she held me.

I have not so much patience," she said. "I will have rice now or your husband shall hear that his wife is as virtuous as he believes—or she pretends"

He believes what is true," I said with anger. "I do pretend"

Perhaps he has not seen what I have seen," she said, there was menace in her voice and threat in the words. mings and goings in the twilight, and soft speech, and of milk and honey such as men make to the women have known"

Stop," I howled at her, and put my hands to my ears. ughts kept hurtling through my head like frenzied irrels in a new-forged cage With sudden clarity I re-ed my daughter's looks that far-off day when I had gone Kenny, my son's words, such men have power, especially r women; remembered my own foolish silences. I closed eyes and sank down. She came and sat by me.

Which is it to be? Which is it to be?..."

Her words were hammering at my brain, the horrible lables were beating the air around me, the whole place s full of their sound.

I need you,' I cried to myself, 'Nathan, my husband. cannot take the risk, because there is a risk since she is ever and I am not In your anger or your jealousy, or en because you are not yourself after these long strained onths, you may believe what she says and what she means. ecause I have deceived you and cannot deny all

"I do not want your pity," she said savagely, my husband. He is alive and well—he is living another."

I thought of her husband, slow, sturdy, dependable, like an ox, and I could not believe it of him; then I of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted scented thighs that had held so many men, and I if after all these years he had not at last found out her. 'Perhaps the truth has been forced upon thought, looking at her with suspicion, and I gazed upon that ravaged beauty.

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"I must have some rice too I cannot come every ...as it is I have waited a long time to make sure you alone."

"There is no rice to be given away," I said. "I think of my husband and children. These are not of plenty."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I will have some. damage will never be repaired whilst I hunger. The no life for me until I am whole again."

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"My sons," she said, looking at me speculatively, not mine alone." Seeing my bewilderment she added, have wives. I would never approach them now."

isting aside the small core of suspicion each time it ned. 'Surely not. Who else? Who?'

long time passed; when at last I rose, my limbs were and prickling, and darkness had given way to the first beginnings of dawn.

athan was not in the hut when I went back: I saw sitting beside the paddy fields as he often did when could not sleep The boys were still asleep, the two r ones side by side, Kuti squeezed close to Ira and she h her arm thrown across him I shook her by the lder, and Kuti woke first and began to cry. I picked up and took him outside and left him there, and when nt back the others were awake I looked at the three and I thought bitterly. 'One of them has done this ne.... Which one? Which one?' I thought, ques-ing, looking at the three faces as if to read their thoughts; there was nothing to see save alarm, they shrank a from my vehemence

must know," I shouted "I must know who has done thing"

ey looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Ira said lly, "We would not take what belonged to us all"

Tell me I am imagining the loss," I stormed at her, that I myself have eaten it"

hey stared at me in silence, amazed. Outside Kuti was ling Attracted by his cries, Nathan had come up, now alled to me.

See to the child," he said frowning. "Can you not r him? He will choke"

So much the better," I said. "It will be one mouth less feed."

You are ill," he said. "You do not know what you saying" He picked up the child, soothing him in his s, and then gave him to Ira.

My heart is sick," I said "I have been robbed, one of my own children, of rice, which above all is most precious"

Is that what said to them?"

I nodded I saw his face wither.

"I took it," he said at last.

"You? My husband? I do not believe it!"

"It is true"

Silence fell like a shroud I listened to it locked [illegible] own brooding bitterness Then it was rent by a sou[nd] raw, so painful, that my nerves began screaming in re[sponse] I looked up and it was Nathan His face was w[et] from his throat came those dry hideous sobs

"Not for myself," he was muttering, trying to cont[rol his] treacherous voice, "for another I took it for [another] There was no other way I hoped you would not [know] I had to do it"

I went to him I did not want to know any mor[e] he had done it or for whom, it was no longer impo[rtant] but he was still speaking it was as if he could not st[op]

"Kunthi took it all, I swear it She forced me, I [did not] want you to know"

Presently he was quiet

"She has a strange power, this woman," I said, [to] myself

"Not strange," Nathan said "I am the father [of her] sons She would have told you, and I was weak"

Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger, reproach, To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel [way!] Kali's words she has fire in her body, men burn [for her] and after My husband was of those men He had [been with] her not once but twice, he had gone back to give [her a] second son 'And between, how many times,' I tho[ught] bleak of spirit, 'while her husband in his impotence [and I] in my innocence did nothing'

"It was a long time ago," Nathan said. "I was young, and she a skilful woman"

"The first time was before our marriage," he said.

"One did not see the evil for the beauty," he said.

At last I made an effort and roused myself.

"It is as you say a long time ago," I said wearily. "[S]he is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest"

me possible for me to speak as well. I told him
rlier visit and the grain she had extorted from me
d it seemed to me that a new peace came to us
ed at last from the necessity for lies and conceal-
nd deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us,
th the power we ourselves had given her wrested
from Kunthi.
that the last of the rice was gone it was in a sense
f: no amount of scheming and paring would make it
y further: the last grain had been eaten.
ereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft
fruit of the prickly pear, a sweet potato or two,
kened and half-rotten, thrown away by some more pros-
us hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to
h near the river Early and late my sons roamed the
ntryside, returning with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of
arcane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut
ed from the gutter in the town For these they must
e ranged widely, for other farmers and their families,
ke plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food;
l for every edible plant or root there was a struggle—
lesperate competition that made enemies of friends and
an end to humanity.
It was not enough Sometimes from sheer rebellion we
grass, although it always resulted in stomach cramps
d violent retching. For hunger is a curious thing: at
st it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and
your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and
ere is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were
ing devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you
y a moment's respite even while you know and fear the
quel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this
o is with you always, so that you think of food many
mes a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you
nd because you know this you try to avoid the thought
ut you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, al
ain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky
ke a well in drought, and it is now that the strength drain

from your limbs, and you try to rise and find ; '
or to swallow water and your throat is powerless, and
the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid
to the uttermost.

'It will not be long before the harvest,' Nathan
murmur, and I would agree with him, stifling the
whether our strength would last till then, saying, 'A
not long now; only a little time before the grain

It happened to me too, but I could not see mysel
what happened to others: saw their flesh melt aw
their skin sag and sink between their jutting bone
their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs cu
from under the skin; and what withered the your
doubly hard on the old and they were emaciated twi

But of us all Kuti suffered the most. He had nev
a healthy child; now he was constantly ailing. At
asked for rice-water and cried because there was no
later he gave up asking and merely cried Even
sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly,
ting no one to rest. Ira was gentlest with him, and t
patient, nursing him in her skinny arms and giving hi
of what came to her, but more often than not he
away, unable to take the rough food we offered, an
she would hold him against her and give him her
and he would pull at the parched teat and be soothe
for a while his thin wailing would die away

CHAPTER XV

ONE day Raja went out as usual and did not come back. At dusk they brought his body home slung between t— ... There ... th, fresh ... is head, ... ir heads and shuffled their feet and spoke in low voices and then they went away It was real, yet it seemed a nightmare, it could not be true that my son lay dead before me Thus my thoughts, dazed and confused, injecting pain where there was numbness; and my mind, furtively touching the edges of realisation, then fleeing from it in terror

He had been caught, they said, something about money. What had my son to do with money, who had not a pie ... ey told me They ... As if I did not ... But why should ... me, but the sense ... ut I could not remember. They repeated themselves again and again, but I kept forgetting I heard Ira begin to sing a low dirge, she was rocking gently back and forth, and she was crying.

"What are you crying for?" I said "You have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears"

She looked at me stupidly, and away, and down at her brother. Her sorrow flowed to me, the numbness began to clear. I tried frantically to keep it—I might as well have tried to imprison a cloud.

For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without, ... leaving this huddle of bones and flesh without ...

) business to be, and when the chowkidars caught him they
und he had stolen a calf-skin."

"I do not believe it," I said "What use had he for such
thing?"

"Not in itself maybe," he replied in a strained voice,
if struggling to keep his temper, "but of course he could
ave sold it—sold it anywhere. We have had a lot of
sses recently."

"You cannot blame my son," I said wearily. "We live
om hand to mouth, as you can see ..there is no wealth
re, such as your goods might have brought."

"I am not blaming your son alone," he said carefully,
ut of course it is well known your sons have been trouble-
kers Now we do not want any trouble from you, you
derstand. The lad was caught in the act of stealing—
ybe, as you say, for the first time and in a moment of
akness—still, he was caught, and for the consequences
it followed, no one was to blame except himself. He
ould not have struggled. In these circumstances you
turally have no claim on us."

Claim?" I said. "I have made no claim I do not
derstand you."

He made a gesture of impatience.

You may think of it later, and try to get compensa-
n. I warn you, it will not work."

Compensation,' I thought. 'What compensation is there
death?' I felt confused, I did not understand what
was getting at. There was a pause The timid man
d kindly:

He was not brutally treated or anything, you know.
ey merely tapped him with a lathi, as he was trying to
cape, and he fell He must have been very weak or some-
ing."

He was," I said "He worked hard, and ate little."

Naturally, it must have been a blow for you," said the
mid one "It is hard to lose—that is——" He tailed
[illegible] his companion's glance fixed on him.

CHAPTER XVI

"THERE is the reaping," I said, "and the threshing and winnowing. How shall we manage when the time [co]mes?"

"When the time comes," Nathan said with a gleam in [hi]s eye, "the strength will be forthcoming, never fear."

I looked at him doubtfully thin and drawn, with thighs [an]d arms so puny that no muscle showed even when he [flex]ed them. The rice would have to be lifted plant by [pla]nt, and the grain separated from the husk, and the husk [be]aten for the last few grains . it meant working long hours [in] the flooded fields with bent back, and much labouring [the]reafter converting the paddy into rice. It was no task for [we]akened bodies

"You will see," he said with confidence "We will find [the] strength One look at the swelling grain will be enough [to] renew our vigour"

Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen [We] watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it [be] snatched away, or as a mother her child, with pride and [aff]ection And most of all with fear

As we sat there Irawaddy came to us, stepping softly.

"It is hot within," she said forlornly. "I could not rest."

She went and picked a head of paddy before sitting down [bes]ide us I saw her fingers parting the husk, feeling for [th]e grain within

"How much longer?"

The same question, the answer to which she already knew, [wh]o had lived on the land since birth.

"Three weeks," Nathan's reply, grave, sincere, absolutely [ho]nest where another might have been tempted to easier [wo]rds.

"It is not long to wait," I said, trying to hearten her, "And if the Gods are kind it may even be sooner."

Through relief and exhaustion I slept well that night, aking refreshed before daybreak with a renewed hope-fhess. 'Soon all will be well,' I thought. 'We shall eat id the strength will come back to us, and there will be more fear. This has been a bad time but it is passing as I things must, and now it is not joy, which passes in a ice, but sorrow, which is slower in the going, and so one ust be patient. A few more days' waiting, a few more iys' anxiety — it is not beyond enduring, it is not too much ask' This I thought as I lay there, listening to the unds of sleep and lost in my own imaginings

The darkness was lifting when I heard the sound of otsteps, wary, soft, less heard than felt as a slight tremor the ground. If it had been a reverberating gong, that und could not have had more violent effect. My fancies d headlong from me; in their place a cloud of black d grey arose, revolving before my eyes and assuming tastic shapes and forms until at last one stood out arly away from the swirling mists and with a face to it. inthi. No one but Kunthi, coming stealthily by night to eve from us what little we had, unashamed as she was d always had been

The footsteps were coming nearer. I raised myself on y elbow the better to listen, trying to still the thudding my ear-drums which impeded my hearing Nearer and arer. I stood up, bracing myself for the encounter, and pped from the familiar darkness of the hut into the grey-g night outside. The figure was there, soft and blurred outline, but a woman's. I threw myself at it, pinioning e arms savagely, thrust at it and beat it to the ground; l on it with fury; felt the weak struggles of the body neath mine like the feeble fluttering of a trapped bird, d exulted The air was full of harsh sounds, but whether ey issued from my throat or hers, or existed only in my agination, I do not know. The being that was me was longer in possession · it had been consumed in the flames anger and hatred that raged through me in those nutes; what took its place I do not know.

Then I heard a thin, shrill scream "Mother! Mother!" Hands were dragging me away. I felt myself pulled and thrown to one side "Fiend! Madwoman!" Nathan was shrieking. "Accursed mother!" He was bending over the form, doing something to it. I saw he was quite naked and wondered at it, forgetting he had come straight from sleep. He turned to me

"Are you out of your mind? Your own daughter, you have killed her Murderess!"

He and Selvam carried her in I slunk after them, disbelieving It could not be Irawaddy It was some monstrous mistake they had made, not I I crept to her side and saw it was Irawaddy Her face was puffed and bore horrible marks, one lip was bleeding where her tooth had bitten down. I closed my eyes Red circles opened out before them, receding into an endless blackness I shook myself clear of them and went to aid my husband. He had a pot of water beside him and was wiping the blood from her body. His dhoti was stained with blood I took the cloth from him.

"I will see to her"

He thrust me aside "Get away; you have done enough harm. You are not fit"

"I thought it was Kunthi," I whispered

He moved a little, making room for me, but remained near, not wholly trusting

She had been badly cut A long jagged gash showed in her left side, there was a similar one on her left wrist.

"These wounds," I said "I did not make them." I did not expect him to believe me

"I know The bangles broke"

Bangles? How could she have bangles, who had not a pie of her own? I stared at him, not knowing amid the unreal happenings whether those were his words or only what I had heard. He pointed.

"Do you not see the glass — there and there. She was wearing bangles."

They had broken against her body, which had protected ie from injury. I began to swab The cuts were full of lass, some of it in splinters, some of it in powder like hining sand. When I had cleaned them I bound the two rgest gashes For the rest there was nothing I could use, it these were smaller and mercifully soon stopped bleeding he sari I had taken from her was soaked with blood and imy where dust clung to the wet cloth I took it down the river intending to wash it, shook it clear of dust and oken glass As I did so, something dropped from the lds, fell in the muddy water, sank, and was lost, but not fore I had seen that it was a rupee

I went on with my work, scrubbing the blood-stains, nsing the cloth, laying it on the grass to dry then I me back, swept and cleaned the hut, cleared the court-rd, removed all signs of the struggle that had been The n was moving to midday by the time I had finished ow that there was nothing more to do, the thoughts I d so far avoided came crowding in on me in agitated rmoil. Who had given her the money Why? Had she len it, and if so how and who from? Why did she ve to walk by night wearing glass bangles? I kept very l, not to waken my sleeping daughter, while the thoughts nt galloping through my head, and question after ques-n, unanswered.

Kuti, lying in a corner of the hut, began to moan. Ira rd and opened her eyes, gesturing vaguely towards him went to her first.

'Lie still; the cuts will open again"

She looked at me sombrely.

'Feed him; he is hungry Take the rupee you will find my sari"

knew then that it was she who had been responsible the improvement in Kuti, not my prayers

Nathan was about to say something, to question her per-s I gripped his arm, forcing him to silence Ira was ggling to rise. I went to her.

Ira gave me a sidelong glance :

"Your imagination would not travel that far"

"You do not know me," I said, troubled "And I no ger understand you."

"The truth is unpalatable," she replied

I pondered awhile, searching my memory : then it came me · the man who had called after Raja's death He said the same thing. The truth is unpalatable

Nathan came in from the fields at sundown as Ira was ing forth. He had been clearing the irrigation chan- and strengthening the dams, the fork he carried was ed with soil and water. He thrust it into the earth and ned on it.

"Where do you go at this hour?"

"It is better not to speak"

"I will have an answer."

"I can give you none"

Nathan's brows drew together, she had never before den to him in this manner Looking at her, it seemed me that almost over-night she had changed; she had n tender and modest and obedient, now she had re- uished every one of these qualities; it was difficult to eve she had ever been their possessor.

Nathan was groping for words, stumbling a little over m.

"I will not have it said — I will not have you parading night ——"

"Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there need. I will not hunger any more."

"Like a harlot," he said "A common strumpet."

The veins in his forehead were standing out, on each ple a pulse throbbed fiercely. Ira stood defiant before n, uttering no denial, fingers plucking at the fringe of her n. I closed my eyes, I could not bear to see them thus.

"These are but words," she said at last. "There are ers, kinder ones, . . . for decency's sake ——"

"Decency!" he "Do not speak of

She was quiet for a moment, and he said with deli cruelty,

"No man will look at you, defaced as you are."

"The cuts will heal," she retorted. "Men do not my face."

I think he laid a restraining hand on her: for I h her say, "Let me pass," and there was a slight ru sound as she withdrew from his grasp

Well, we let her go We had tried everything in power, there was nothing more we could do. She no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into subm but a grown woman with a definite purpose and a vincible determination We had for so long accepte obedience to our will that when it ceased to be give turally, it came as a considerable shock; yet there w option but to accept the change, strange and bewil as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted It w simple as that · we forbade, she insisted, we lost. got used to her comings and goings, as we had got u so much else

With her earnings Irawaddy was able to buy ric salt, and milk for the child, who was too weak for any else. After the roots and leavings we had existed was grateful enough for the food, but of what she b Nathan would not touch a morsel. Day after day he out as before, delving and scraping for food, as thin dry as a hollow bamboo stick

"What is done is done," I said, urging him to eat. "I is no stricture on you, for you have tried."

"I will not touch it," he said, eyeing me steadily. W bitterness was behind this I do not know, or what demnation of his powerlessness to feed his children; this I do know · his spirit was very strong, and he was upright man.

For the first few days after Ira resumed feeding with milk, he seemed to grow better, but the impro —if improvement it had been: I do not know, for ceased to cry and we took this for improvement—did

ntinue. Soon it became clear that he was sinking. His es grew larger in his pinched face, there was a brightness their soft brown as if all that was left of life was contrated there; and indeed they seemed to be the only ctive part of him. From his corner, when he was no nger capable of any other movement, his eyes constantly llowed us, seeming never to tire in their restless wandering therwise he lay quiet like a bruised fledgling, with the dry, rched lips of exhaustion and a body which could struggle more.

Only once I heard him call · a slight whisper that barely ched me.

"Ama?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I cannot see you — I cannot see anything"

"I am here my son, very near you"

There was a feeble movement of his arms, and I knelt side him and clasped them round my neck, holding them re, for he was too weak

Sleep, dearest. Soon you will be better, and then you be able to see again I promise you, you will see again"

He seemed content; he accepted the lies I told him and ped a little — perhaps in relief, for who knows what fears mented his child's mind? Soon I felt him relax and sing his hands gently drew away from him. A little er I heard a slight sound and turning saw that he had ened his eyes and was gazing at Ira, staring at her unnking I went to him and saw that his eyes were sights; already a thin film was overspreading them. I picked m up and held him to me, his limp, emaciated body, light I might have been holding a handful of leaves, not child, sagged lifeless against mine I crooned to him, rgetting he was dead, until the cold came creeping through limbs and he began to stiffen; then at last I laid him wn, closing his eyes and pushing back the fronds of hair at clung damply to his brow. He looked tired but

at

face and bitter eyes Our last child, conceived in happi
at a time when the river of our lives ran gently, had b
taken from us ; I knew too well what he felt Yet, altho
I grieved, it was not for my son : for in my heart I c
not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too l
and had been too painful for me to call him back to c
tinue it.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Kuti was gone — with a bland indifference that mocked our loss — the abundant grain grew ripe. It was the second crop of the year, sown on ground which had not been allowed to lie fallow, and so we did not think it would be other than meagre; but contrary to our expectations it was a very good harvest. Every husk was filled, the paddy stood firm and healthy, showing no breaks in their ranks. We worked through the days and in the twilight getting in the rice, and then we worked three more days draining the fields and clearing them, and then three more nights sifting and winnowing. Even so, a heap of unhusked paddy lay in our granary, waiting until the marketing should be done.

"It is as I said," Nathan exclaimed. "Strength has been given to us. Else how could so much have been achieved by such as we are?" He looked round triumphantly, pointing to the neat white hills of rice and the husks in a bristling, brown heap. We looked at each other, streaked with sweat, thin and bony like scarecrows and as ugly, and suddenly what he had said seemed very funny; and first Selvam and then Ira began to laugh, helpless, speechless, with tears running down their cheeks, until we older people slowly joined them — could not help but join in their laughter and the spectre of what had been tweaked at our memories in vain. There we were, the four of us, hysterical, released, rocking with laughter and gasping for breath which ran out as fast as we sucked it in. The hollow cheeks and bulging [illegible] became matter for lau[illegible] r
minds [illegible] t
the thr[illegible] s
in some measure born of relief that we could do so.

Nathan especially was in exuberant mood. He kept

CHAPTER XVIII

WENT to market laden with smooth-skinned brinjals and pumpkins, round and fleshed like young women ie earth had yielded richly · there were, besides, beans d potatoes, melons and chillies, and I was well pleased th them and with the silver coins I had received in exange. I no longer sold to Biswas, there were several ier shops in the town now where I was paid better, and ere I did not have to endure the sly, spiteful observans he made. Increasing years had added more grease his bulk, more flesh to his paunch; they had not sweeten his nature or endowed him with more kindliness. nfounding the curses that came his way — and there were ny, for his usury was harsh beyond necessity —he conticd to prosper, squeezing the life from those hapless creaes who were driven to borrow from him, and gaining strength from their weakness.

seeing me pass, he came and stood in his doorway and led.

'Rukmani! I have news for you. Stop a minute!"

'What is it?"

'Kenny is back. I have seen him."

'So," I said warily "That is good news for everybody."

'Especially for you," he said, keeping his eye on me.

'For everybody," I repeated, "for he is a good doctor. iny people are in his debt."

'He is also a man," he said. "They say he is a good nd to you."

'To me and mine," I said with rising temper. "He has ie much for us"

'For you particularly," he insisted, his flabby lips tching with innuendo. "I have heard from Ku s is so"

"A whore's tale," I said contemptuously, "as suspect her body."

He thrust his face up to mine

"Yet not for that reason dismissed," he said, leering.

I wanted to strike him, I wanted to ram his words b into his throat I held myself still with an effort.

"Foul-mouthed pig!" I said. "Carrion crow!"

He only smiled, being used to harsh words.

"As hot-headed as ever, Rukmani," he said. "Wh will you turn when next you need money?"

He was so slippery, so worthless, that my anger d Not even the malignant power of Kunthi could rouse I felt too remote.

I hung about for a while, unable to make up my whether to try and seek him in the town, or whethe go home in prudence and await his coming, as I felt he would. Then it struck me as ludicrous that at this I should walk with caution, and I went therefor white-washed cottage on the fringes of the town, ex nt, carrying a garland of roses and jasmine to welcome and a lime for good luck.

The cottage was bare — it always had been — and and lifeless from long disuse. Dust lay thick on the fl there were neat hillocks of chipped cement and earth wl bandicoots, for some obscure reason of their own, had So much I saw from the broken front window, the pushed open the door to enter.

Kenny was standing in the smaller room that led the main one. He turned when he heard me come in, I him frown.

"How did you know I was here?"

Accustomed though I was to him, the brusque words, short manner, dashed the welcome from my lips.

"Biswas told me," I said. "I came at once."

There was a silence. The garland I was holding an encumbrance, I felt I had been stupid to buy it, the lime seemed unnecessary. I tried to hide them my back. He noticed at once.

"What have you got there?"

"A few things — I have just been to market," I began ...dy.

"A garland, is it not?"

"Yes," I said sheepishly "I bought it for you. You ...ss well."

He drew me to the window and pointed Outside lay ...eap of garlands, roses, lilies, chrysanthemums; evidently ...ers had been before me

"Not a guess," he said gravely, "a certainty You were ... the first."

"Well-intentioned for all that ——" I was beginning hotly ...n he began to laugh, grinning widely so that the lines of ... face were somehow lost in the creases of laughter, ...ing him look young and amiable. I felt better at once; ...strangeness vanished

"You have been away a long time," I said "Too long; ... have missed you"

"Why?" he said "More trouble?"

[illegible] and looked covertly [illegible], with [illegible] years [illegible] "Yet

...as not only on that account we missed you It was ...," I stopped, not knowing how to finish He would ...e helped us in our need with food and money and skill, ... it was something more than this that he offered us, and ...ould not find words for it

"Your presence," I said haltingly, "means a lot to us ...ere is a rare gentleness in you, the sweeter for its brief ...pearances."

I do not know what emboldened me — perhaps it was his ...ence. He seemed to be hardly listening He was still ...nding, looking out of the window, biting his nails

"Troubles," he said. "We all have them. I suppose ...e crops failed and you starved."

"It was a bad time," I answered him. "We

sons. Raja died by an accident. The child was too for this world; he could not live as we did. After crops failed he ——" I stopped again. The memory of th days was ever with me, yet the passing of time had it quiescent; now my own words brought it savagely with a shrill, stabbing pain that swept the words away was quiet for a while, waiting for it to fade, to regain ness. He did not look round, perhaps he sensed my strug

"Enough of me," I said at last. "What of you yours?"

He turned on me roughly. "What concern is that yours?"

"None; save that I wish them well."

"Save your wishes," he said unpleasantly. "My has left me. My sons have been taught to forget me

I tried and failed to imagine her, this woman who c after so many years renounce altogether her husband, the bond that must surely have existed despite his absences. 'Perhaps it is just this that has driven he t,' I thought. 'He is not without blame'

"You think it is my fault," he said "Do not den our face speaks plainly enough for me"

"Women need men," I said, shrugging "It is not to deprive a woman"

"Tell me also," he said "Do you not think a man choose his work?"

"Such a man as you, yes," I replied.

"What then if his wife cannot accompany him?"

"Cannot?" I said. "She must. A woman's plac with her husband"

He sighed impatiently "You simplify everything, bu without understanding Your views are so limited it is possible to explain to you."

"Limited, yes," I agree. "Yet not wholly without und standing. Our ways are not your ways."

"You have sound instincts," he said.

For the first time since I had known him I saw a gr of admiration in his eyes.

"I am not a fool," I said, speaking in a low voice, pleased the commendation in his eyes, a little hurt by it as well. Have I not so much sense to see that you are not one of us? You live and work here, and there is in your heart solicitude for us and love for our children. But this is not your country and we are not your people. If you lived here your whole life it still would not be."

"My country," he said. "Sometimes I do not know which is my country. Until today I had thought perhaps it was this."

He sounded bitter and weary: his forlorn spirit touched me, and a great emptiness seemed to unfold in me. I wished I could have my words back, locked away safely in myself, unsaid, powerless to wound.

"Save your regrets," he said. "You have told me nothing I did not know."

I rose to go. "My husband and children will be happy to see you. We shall be glad to welcome you in our house."

"You are not without riches, as I have said before," he said, speaking half to himself. "How is your daughter? She was a pretty young woman."

"Well; she is carrying."

"So her coming to me was not in vain."

"Had she been barren for ever, it would have been better."

"Why? Was it not your wish—"

"Not this way," I said, "with the father any one of a dozen men."

"I suppose it was necessary," he said quietly. "I have seen it happen before."

"She would go," I replied. "She was devoted to the child; she would go. But of course she knew nothing, being inexperienced in such matters, and now she is with child. She conceived quickly."

"You will feel better when it is born," he said. "A baby is no worse for being conceived in an encounter."

"You may be right," I said bitterly, "but you do not realise the shame of it. People have not spared us."

He stared at me impatiently.

"That is all you can think of: what people will ... One goes from one end of the world to the other to ... the same story Does it matter what people say?" ... tone was contemptuous. 'Well,' I thought. 'It is e... you, but perhaps not quite so simple for us.'

I walked home, musing over what he had sai... presently it seemed to me there was truth in his ... and I felt a little comforted. Nathan had said m... same thing: he and Kenny, so different in other w... yet united in their views about this.

CHAPTER XIX

KENNY'S return was the beginning of another change in our lives, and in Selvam's Selvam, who for all that had been reared on the land and had the earth in his blood, yet did not take to farming Like his brothers, he was hard-working and conscientious, but he had no love for it and in return it did not yield to him He had a knowledge of crops and seasons, born of experience, but where crops thrived under Nathan's hand, under his they wilted. Despite anxious care, the seed he planted did not sprout, the plants that sprouted did not bear.

One day he came straight from working in the fields, threw down the spade he was carrying and announced he was finished with the land.

"I am no farmer," he said, "The land has no liking for me, and I have no time for it."

"What then will you do, my son?" I said, worried. "How will you live when we are gone?"

He did not reply at once, but sat down cross-legged, looking out absently beyond the small courtyard to the cool green of the paddy fields But he was not thinking of them

"Kenny is building a hospital," he said. "When it is ready he will need an assistant, and he has offered me the job."

"But what can you know of such work?"

"Nothing He is going to train me, starting as soon as possible. He says it will not be too difficult for me, for I am not without learning."

It was true. Selvam had been cast in the same mould as his brothers He had quickly learned what I had to teach and had progressed from there by his own efforts and enthusiasm. Study came to him naturally; he wrote and read as I had once done, avidly, with pleasure. 'He w

learn,' I thought. 'This is the chance he has been wa
for.'

Selvam began to fidget.

"I have told my father," he said hesitantly. "He is
willing."

I smiled at him "So am I. I wish you well"

He relaxed "I am glad. I thought you might b
were — displeased"

"Not displeased Perhaps disappointed, since all our
have forsaken the land. But it is the best way for you"

"It is the best way," he repeated after me. "It wi
a great venture. We have many plans and much hope"

We both relapsed into silence I watched him cov
wondering whether I should say, 'You must be prepa
his new association will not be taken at face value, t
will be vilifiers who will say it was done not for you
or your mother, who will seek to destroy your peace';
hen I thought resolutely, 'I will not take the fire fro
lve or sow suspicion between them,' and so I held
eace. But his steady eyes were on me, calm and level
"I am not unaware," he said quietly "But is it
ufficient that you have the strength and I have trust?

"It is indeed," I said with relief "I wanted only
ou should know"

We smiled at each other in perfect understanding.

I sought out Kenny again.

"We are once more in your debt. My son is overjoyed T
is something he has waited for without knowing it."

"I am indebted to him as well I need an assistant;
promises to be a good one and will I hope be the first
many. I could not carry on alone. The town has gr
and is still growing, as you know."

"It will be bigger than what went before?"

"It will be a hospital, not a dispensary," he said cold
"Let me show you"

He pulled out several papers, drawings and long she
covered with calculations which I could not understand ev

hen he explained them though this I did not confess. I
thered only that it would be a big affair.

"Where is the money to come from" I said bewildered.
Such a construction will need I do not know how many
indreds of rupees."

"I have thousands" he replied

"I did not realise. You have lived like us, the poor"

"The money is not mine It has been given to me -- I
ve collected it while I have been away"

"In your country?" I said. "From your people?"

"Yes," he said impatiently. "Part of it came from my
intry and my people, part of it from yours. Why do
u look puzzled?"

"I have ... d humbly. "I do
... us and who know

because they have the means," he said, "and because
y have learnt of your need Do not the sick die in the
eets because there is no hospital for them? Are not
ldren born in the gutters? I have told you before," he
l. "I will repeat it again; you must cry out if you want
p. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will
cour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his
?"

It is said ——" I began

Never mind what is said or what you have been told.
ere is no grandeur in want -- or in endurance."

rivately I thought, 'Well, and what if we gave in to
troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures
ed to be so weak, for is not a man's spirit given to him
ise above his misfortunes? As for our wants, they are
ny and unfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate as
supply them? Want is our companion from birth to
th, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in
ree. What profit to bewail that which has always been
cannot change?'

is eyes narrowed: whether from our long a...
rom many dealings w... beings, and

learn,' I thought. 'This is the chance he has been
for.'

Selvam began to fidget.

"I have told my father," he said hesitantly. "He
willing"

I smiled at him "So am I. I wish you well."

He relaxed. "I am glad. I thought you migh
were—displeased"

"Not displeased. Perhaps disappointed, since all
have forsaken the land But it is the best way for y

"It is the best way," he repeated after me. "It
a great venture We have many plans and much ho

We both relapsed into silence I watched him
wondering whether I should say, 'You must be pr
this new association will not be taken at face valu
will be vilifiers who will say it was done not for y
for your mother, who will seek to destroy your peac

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CHAPTER XX

Not in the town, where all that was natural had long been sacrificed, but on its outskirts, one could still see the assing of the seasons. For in the town there were the rowds, and streets battened down upon the earth, and the lth that men had put upon it, and one walked with care r what might lie beneath one's feet or threaten from before behind; and in this preoccupation forgot to look at the n or the stars, or even to observe they had changed their tting in the sky: and knew nothing of the passage of time ve in dry frenzy, by looking at a clock. But for us, who ed by the green, quiet fields, perilously close though these re to the town, nature still gave its muted message Each ssing day, each week, each month, left its sign, clear and mistakable

The tender budding of our new year, the periwinkles and e jasmine, the soft, scented champak blossom, had yielded ace to the fierce flowering jacaranda and gold mohur, before a's time came for giving birth When my daughter was labour I erected the bamboo paling outside to warn my sband and son, as is the custom for those who have only e room and one dwelling, and when I had scoured the t and poured wet dung on it I brought out the pallet of tted straw I myself had used, for Ira to lie on; and went d gathered the petals the trees had shaken about them, d took them into her, a vivid basket of layer upon layer gold and red and mauve and purple.

"A child of summer," I said, "should be sturdy."

She smiled and laid her hands on the petals

"He is. I feel it."

While I waited I thought of the other births this very t had seen. First Ira herself, then the long, long interval d after that almost every passing year I bore a son. There d been hope and expectation, perhaps some *anxiety*, *before*

each birth; they were natural feelings. But now fears came swarming about my head like the black flying ants after storm, and I cowered from the beat of their wings. A child conceived in an encounter fares no worse than a child born in wedlock...so Kenny had said; but could one be sure? A man takes his wife with passion, as is his nature, yet he is gentle with her: amid the fire of breast on breast and bared thigh on thigh he still can hold himself, and give as much as he takes, leaving the exultant flesh unbruised. The woman is his, his wife, not only now for this surging experience, but tomorrow and next year. She will carry his seed and he will see her fruitful, watch while day by day the child grows within her. And so he is tender and careful and comes to her clean that their fulfilment may be rich and blessed.

But the man who finds a woman in the street, raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, flings her a few coins that he may possess her, holds her unresisting whatever he does to her, for this is what he has paid for—what cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained his relief, she her payment; he merges carelessly into the human throng, consigning her back into the shadows where she worked or to the streets where she loitered.

Of the thousands of men in the village, in the town, perhaps another village, another town, one man unknown is the father: of the vast range of manhood, who is to say he was not of the unsound, the unclean? What care, what safeguard is there when the consequences of one's acts are hidden from one's thankful eyes, and the woman is one of many, soft, desired, lost, forgotten!

If Ira had any fears she did not show them: perhaps she had fought her battles out alone when I was not there to see and when her face could not betray her; or perhaps her love for children swamped every other feeling. She was meant to have children: I had always known that. It was a cruel twist of Fate that gave them to her this way.

Then at last the birth began, and while I was minister-

her all these thoughts coiled back into my brain, leaving ly the present and the immediate future which every sing second converted instantly into the past. Then there is no past or future, only now, the present, as I received e child and held him, while the fears that were nameless scended on me and shrieked their message and were no ore nameless. I held him, this child begotten in the street an unknown man in a moment of easy desire, while the ightness of the future broke and fell about me like so many eces of coloured glass.

I did not want his mother to see: I washed him slowly, d massaged oil into his body, hoping to mitigate the iteness of it, hoping to give colour to his skin, while he d lustily, for he was a healthy child; and finally his ther called for him I swaddled him carefully before I e him to her hoping — still hoping — that she would not ice

"Your son," I said, handing her the bundle, hovering in my anxiety. She took it, smiling and relaxed.

"A lovely child," she said, gazing at the small face fondly. "air as a blossom."

Fair! He was too fair. Only his mother failed to see how natural his fairness was, or to notice that the hair which w slow and unwilling from his pate was the colour of onlight, or that his eyes were pink Sometimes I wondered ether her mind was gone, since she could not see what

re the most beautiful baby any woman cou... was to her. Such heaviness of spirit as there was, pressed t on her but on us, her parents, and of us Nathan was e most burdened.

"She has lost her reason," he said. "She does no r child as he is, as she would have him be. "

Nathan's voice reached me from a distance:

"What is the matter with you? Are you not fe[illegible] well?"

"I am all right I was thinking."

"Give it a rest," he said "Give it a rest."

I was relieved that Kali, most garrulous of women, h[illegible] not come, but it was a short-lived relief She had been [illegible]fering from one of her periodic attacks of ague, and [illegible] soon as she had got rid of it she came, waddling, for [illegible] had put on a lot of fat when prosperity had returne[illegible] the land.

"I would have come before," she puffed, "but for [illegible] ague The shivering was bad this year and the fever [illegible] tell you, I hardly know how I survived" She lowere[illegible] voice confidentially. "You know how it is—not too [illegible] at my age."

"I hope you are better," I said

"Ah well, one must not expect too much I am [illegible] . But I did not come to talk about myself"

I looked at her without favour · it was plain enough [illegible] she had come She lowered her voice again

"Is it true about the baby? People say he is milk wh[illegible]

"He is fair," agreed Ira equably "See for yours[illegible]" and she held out the sleeping child in her arms Kali [illegible] forward eagerly, quivering in her excitement, and at [illegible] moment as ill luck would have it the child woke, ope[illegible] his weak, pinkish eyes, yawned and began to yell pierc[illegible] Kali stepped back as if she had been deliberately affro[illegible] and such pity as she might have had in her perished

"He looks peculiar," she said frankly. "Not a bit [illegible]mal. Who ever heard of pink eyes in a human child?"

I did not know what to say Nathan was looking [illegible] her sourly: he had never liked her. Ira's face was stra[illegible] and taut and queerly defensive, as if she had been [illegible] and was wondering where the next blow would fall

'She does know,' I thought with something akin to [illegible] yet of course not wholly so. 'She hides her knowledge [illegible]'

The silence went on, everybody afraid to speak, the[illegible]

ss-crossing in the over-full air, eyes averted, shifting ered at last to the ground. Then I heard Selvam clearing throat to speak, and at once heads turned, surprised tened of suspense, very much alert.

"Just a matter of colouring," he said, "or lack of it. It only a question of getting used to. Who is to say this our is right and that is not?"

The words of a boy — Selvam was not sixteen — shaming all.

"But pink —" Kali began

"A pink-eyed child is no worse than a brown-eyed one," said, looking at her with cold, rebuking eyes. "I should e thought your instincts as a woman if nothing else ld have told you that"

He turned away from her contemptuously and began king his fingers to the child Sacrabani, who had been eaming vigorously, began to quieten down: he gave one two more tentative wails, then his mouth split in someng like a smile and his fingers curled round Selvam's.

Selvam turned and smiled at us, raising eloquent eyews: Was not the child exactly the same as other babies? d he not said so?

Triumphantly he turned to look for Kali but she — noticed — had gone

CHAPTER XXI

FROM the day construction began on the hospital, ceased to belong to us. During the preparations, while site was bought and cleared, and a contractor engaged find men and material, he spent his time with Kenny, what they discussed I do not know, but sometimes he ca home elated and sometimes he was morose and deject and it was clear enough that the many delays they countered irked his spirit beyond the telling. Then w construction actually started, the bricks stacked high cement in heaps, whatever time he could spare he spe the site watching while brick was laid on brick and m flowed between : and occasionally when the labourers le (which was not often, for they were a jealous crew), would take a hand in the building himself, for nothing him more pleasure than that. What he did not know that seven more tedious years were to pass before the b g was complete : both he and Kenny, possessed by ce enthusiasm, had, I think, reckoned on a much sh time. May be it was as well they did not know : years is a long time to be patient.

If things had gone as they had hoped, the hospital w have been completed within a year, and Old Granny w not have had to die in the street as she did. There nowhere else she could go · she had lived in the street she died there. Day by day she sat beside her torn g sack selling handfuls of nuts and berries, growing prog sively older, more ragged, less healthy. She had no relat left — no person on whom she had any claim — certa there was no one to enquire whether she made a living how much longer she could continue to do so. Better avoid such questions, better to pass quickly by with a che ful word, than to stop and ask, for who would lightly on the burden of feeding another mouth? And so one

e quietly disappeared. They found her body on the path at led to the well, an empty mud-pot beside her and the nny-sacking tied around her waist She had died of arvation . .

Once a human being is dead there are people enough to ovide the last decencies; perhaps it is so because only n can there be no question of further or recurring assistce being sought. Death after all is final I could not bid the thought, which came from my own uneasy conence, harsh and bitter, as I watched them lift her up, light dust, on to the bier; as mourners came with flowers, as and camphor were laid unstinted on the pyre, as roseter and sandalwood paste were sprinkled on her corpse. it had been ... ranny, ... man ... when ... s sure ...ation . . .

Old Granny's death bore especially hard on me · for apart m the fact that we had been friends since my marriage ould not forgive myself for having accepted the rupee ch might have fed her for several days I wanted to ow it away — give it to the next old crone I saw — anyg to gain my relief; but the money belonged to Sacrabani, to me

You are being very childish," Nathan said. "How long ld a rupee have kept her?"

A few days at least," I said

And what when those few days ran out?"

I don't know something may have turned up It is ity the hospital was not ready She could have gone re"

A hospital is not a soup kitchen," he said

did not know what he meant by a soup kitchen and I ed at him. He repeated the words, pleased that he w and I did not.

Where the poor are fed free of charge," he explained. other countries. Selvam tells me this is a fact."

"And how should he know? He has not been o this town since his birth?"

"From books he has read perhaps—or Kenny may told him. I do not know *how* he knows."

"Well, anyway," I said, going back to what we had discussing, "soup kitchen or not, they would not have n an old ailing woman."

"Why go on about it?" he said exasperated. "Yo *only* distressing yourself and it might never have bee tell you a hospital is only for the sick. There is nowhe the old."

The hospital was no more than a few months old a few feet high when people began attempting to stake claims. They went to Kenny and they came to Selvam they even approached me, his mother, and from the who came I soon knew that not one-tenth could enter what I of little perception knew Kenny and Selvam two-fold · but we none of us said anything, for w woven about us a net of silence in whose meshes wer riously held our fears and our misgivings.

Meanwhile, work on the hospital did not progress : twice the contractor was changed, and each man h appointed new foremen, and these brought their own l ers One year there were not enough men; the nex enough material During one very hot summer the men's huts caught fire and before it could be put out it spread to the timber stacked nearby. The loss had made good, as had also the theft, despite the presence chowkidar, of a cartload of bricks and the cart itself. So times work stopped altogether, for what reasons I d know, while Kenny and Selvam strode about the des site in exasperation, dark as thunder, unapproachable K made frequent trips away from the town from which came back tired and often dispirited; but always work resumed on his return

"Every pie has to be fought for," Selvam said. "It not be easy."

"He told me he had enough," I said. "He was away long time collecting the money."
"There can never be enough," Selvam said, turning away
[illegible] ss pit they were
e 'It is not as
: to myself. 'It
bare your woes
nd catalogue your needs, people have only to close their
es and their ears, you cannot force them to see and to
ar—or to answer your cries if they cannot and will not.'
nce I dared to say as much to Kenny and he looked at me
little sadly and said there were other ways which he could
't explain to me. There was much talk between him and
[illegible] but I do not
rate building
t least it did
on

Before long Selvam began his training. The small white-ished cottage was once again in use, with my son now sisting Kenny. By the second year of his training he gan treating minor cases by himself, and from then on-rds Kenny paid him a small wage, not regularly but as d when funds came his way Once in a moment of oughtlessness I asked how he would contrive to pay all staff when the hospital was finally established, for it was tain many people would be needed to run it His face rkened : he would, he said, find ways and means. It d become his most frequent saying.

CHAPTER XXII

SELVAM and Ira had always been close, the years separation when my daughter went to her husband h affected their relationship not at all, she treated him as if he were her son than her brother, and he in turn acc her love and returned it in his own deep, quiet way understood her well, better than I did who was her mo in fact, I wonder whether parents ever know their ch as they know one another. At any rate in our famil

were better read, more learned, than we were: but since the troubles at the tannery in which her sons become involved, and for other reasons, she had been judiced against any kind of learning. In her view m troubles in the country sprang from the pages of b

Selvam's easy attitude towards her son brought Ira closer to him From the beginning Selvam had acc the child's albinism: accepted it and thought no more From infancy he treated Sacrabani exactly as if he w normal child. The pity of it was that it was a lo battle. No amount of such action on his part or ours bring others to the same persuasion Sacrabani was isol from the start, a white crow in a flock of black, a gra wheat among the rice. By the time he was four, Sacra was used to being a hanger-on — *forever on the fringe* others' activities Because of his difference, the other chil never included him as a matter of course in their games they were short of a player, or for some other good rea they sometimes invited him to join them, but on no acc was he to do so of his own accord. In the hope of thus asked he had to tag along, patient and submissive physical disabilities alone would have ensured his

e; for his skin was unable to stand the sun, and the light ected his eyes. The sight of him crouched in the shade th reddened face and streaming eyes evoked from his comnions not pity but ribaldry. Poor child, he had even to fer the behaviour of his elders, who stared — those who d not seen him before — and nudged each other and ispered and rustled, while those who *had* vied with each er to be the first to enlighten them Then one day, sprung m who knows what taunts flung at him, his questionings, t of many, began.

"Mother, what is a bastard?"

What does one say to a child? What possible answer there? I saw Ira eyeing the boy, startled, wary, ing to guess how much innocence and how much knowledge behind the question, wondering how little and how much could tell him, questioning in her turn to gain time

"Why do you ask?"

"I want to know"

"It is a child whose birth his mother did not wish for"

"Oh," he said, looking at her speculatively. "Did you a me to be born?"

"Yes, of course, darling," Ira cried, and all the guilt of efforts to have an abortion was in her voice "I would lose you for anything Why do you have to ask?"

"I wanted to know," he repeated lightly, noncommitty, not knowing how cruelly he had hurt his mother.

Some days later he tackled her again

"Mother, have I got a father?"

"Yes, dear, of course."

"Where is he?"

"Not here, my son; he is away"

"Why does he never come to see us?"

"He will when he can."

"But why not now?"

"Because he cannot. You will understand when you are er."

"How old?"

"I do not know myself. Now run away and play ' must not ask so many questions."

The first lie; many to follow. The distressing, inescap need for lying.

"I would have told him his father was dead," I s "as he certainly is to all intents and purposes It w have been easier."

"*Do not interfere*," Nathan said "It is for Ira decide."

Ira looked heavy-eyed and hurt. "Yes; you are rig she said "I should have told him that. I was not prep for the question — he is such a baby still"

"He did not think of it himself," I said. "He is as too young. No doubt one of his companions."

"Leave it, leave it," said Nathan "Do not upset girl any more."

He put out his hand to Ira, but she shied away from I saw her leave the hut.

"It is no use going to her," Nathan said sadly. "S ort as there is to be had must come from her "

Nevertheless, after a little while he did go to her his gentleness melted her last remnants of control, fo began to weep. I heard her crying for a long time.

CHAPTER XXIII

MY third son, Murugan, who was a servant, married a girl from the town in which he worked. We had not
n her, nor did we know her family, and the marriage,
the second year after Sacrabani's birth, was solemnised
her parents' house without either of us being present Had
been at all possible we would have gone, but it proved
ond our power. The town was over a hundred miles
ay, and since the harvest had been a poor one and Selvam
s earning very little we had not the money to go by rail.
rgan, it is true, had a bullock in addition to his milch
s, and a cart which he offered to lend us for a small sum,
Nathan was not fit enough to undertake the journey
re and back. He was nearing fifty and no longer as healthy
he had been He had begun to suffer from rheumatism,
apart from this had had several attacks of fever, from
h of which he recovered more slowly and emerged weaker
netimes in the middle of sowing or reaping or tilling, or
innumerable tasks the land demanded, he would stop
straighten up, breathing hard and trembling Often he
s unable to continue work and was forced to lie down in
hut for a while Ira and I did what we could, but the
d is mistress to man, not to woman . the heavy work
ded is beyond her strength Several times Kenny came
see him bringing food and sometimes medicine; he told
bluntly that my husband was not getting enough to eat.

"We eat well enough when the harvest is good," I
swered him, "but of course we have our lean times."

"Too many," he said "Your husband needs milk and
getables and butter, not plain rice day after day."

I looked at him incredulously. "Those can only come
r way when the yield is rich," I said "It cannot be
ways or indeed even frequent, for we are not rich, you
derstand."

nd his peace with you. We would not have had it
rwise"

Yet in your hearts you may have wished for something
"

If so, we have long since forgotten it. We would
wish for our son other than what he would wish for
elf. He has chosen well"

nother silence

Do you never," he said, "think of your future? While
still have your strength and can plan?"

Naturally we think. But plan! How can we? It
ot within our means"

Is there nothing you can do?" he asked "Nothing
l?"

What can we do? There are many like ourselves
cannot provide for the future You know it your-

Yes; I know.. I do not know why I asked; it was
less. There is no provision at all," he said, speak-
half to himself, "neither for old nor young nor sick
accept it; they have no option"

e looked so stern that I grew alarmed

Do not concern yourself," I said diffidently "We
in God's hands."

e looked up sharply, abruptly as if some chain of
ight had been rudely broken · then he left me

athan was lying within. "What happened?" he
d, turning to face me. "You were a long time"

We were talking, that is all."

What about?"

You are as persistent as your grandson," I said, "but
g older you should know better We were talking
ut Selvam. Kenny thinks he will be good *He is*
ing well."

I am glad. Tell me, did he not say anything about
?"

Only that you were not to worry and then
ld soon be on your feet"



one of the truths of our existence as those who live by e land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we fave. We live by our labours from one harvest to the ext, there is no certain telling whether we shall be able to feed urselves and our children, and if bad times are prolonged e know we must see the weak surrender their lives and his fact, too, is within our experience. In our lives there no margin for misfortune.

Still, while there was land there was hope Nothing now, thing whatever. My being was full of the husks of spair, dry, lifeless I went into the hut and looked about Brown mud walls that had crumbled many a time and

...

his own hands in the time he was waiting for me ought me to it with a pride which I, used to better living d so very nearly crushed In it we had lain together, an r children had been born. This hut with all its memorie s to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonge another. And the land itself by which we lived It i cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they d us.

When Selvam came home that night from his studie y husband broke the news to him I do not know wha expected — indignation, anger, perhaps sorrow but he trayed no emotion He put the books he was carrying the wooden crate he had made, then he sat down, still eping his own counsel; the wavering light from the wick its saucer of oil fell on his face, sombre and serious as always was in repose 'Well,' I thought 'This cannot ... and then ...ldom ...med' ...posi- in the brooding silence ... n again, and I thought. 'Naturally he is impatient' s good cause'

uld not. I closed my eyes and felt his hands on my nples where the pulses beat, gently stroking, soothing me the only way he could. He suffered for me, not so ch for himself, and I likewise, so that although together re was more strength there was also more suffering, and each had been alone the way might not have seemed so d, yet I knew neither could have borne it alone Thus fused, my mind turned this way and that, like a paper e dipping to every current of air, unsure of its own hnings

At length in the midst of the blackness I heard Selvam aking and I opened my eyes He seemed to be strug-ig with himself, for the words did not come easily and fierce inner battle he waged had brought the sweat out his forehead and left his lips dry. He was addressing father alone—'No doubt he dismisses me as an hysterical man,' I thought 'He is not far wrong'

I can always return to the land," he was saying "I young and able-bodied together we can rent another ce of land . live as we did"

saw my husband's eyes kindle, I saw in them, fearfully, light of hope 'You should not have said it,' I cried ntly to my son 'It is too difficult for him, cruelly icult' But already Nathan was shaking his head

'No, my son. I would not have it so" He spoke olutely. "There are some things that cannot be rificed . besides I would never be happy Certainly ir mother would not let me rest," he added, smiling a le.

'No; we must go Ira and Sacrabani must come with of course; there is nothing for them here"

'I will stay," said Ira, whom we had supposed asleep. d she rose and came and knelt beside her father "I l not be a burden to you. I am happy enough here. ople are used to me and my son. I cannot start a new e now."

"If I can," said Nathan, "whose youth is only a

mory now, why should not you, n
young ; it will not be difficult for
"*I must think of my son,*" she
"How will you eat?" I said
"If she decides to stay," said S
me. I will look after her. I swe
"And the child?"
"And the child, of course."
"Is it possible?" Nathan aske
you have for yourself"
"Do I not know it?" said Selva
petual shame to me that I have n
rents. Yet I promise they shall not
If it had not been so late at nigh
tired and dispirited — we might h
partly for her sake and partly for
we said no more — not that night
subsequently we had more discussions
only that we were to go
and grandchild were to stay

CHAPTER XXIV

rook down the mats on which we slept from the wall
vhere they hung and rolled them up Inside I
ed the cloth bundle which contained two ollocks of rice,
e chillies, tamarind and salt, and the two wooden bowls,
han's and mine, tying the ends of the rolled mats to
e sure nothing fell out on the way Most of the
ing vessels I had brought with me on my marriage
been sold to pay our debts, of the remainder I left
for Ira and the other two I put aside for ourselves.
grindstone, pestle and mortar were too heavy to take,
ny case my daughter-in-law would be providing these
' cooking days are over,' I thought a little sadly, and
lenly what I had formerly performed without thought,
ven with impatience — the gathering of fuel, and the
ing of the fire, and the waxing of the flames under
steaming pot, with all the business of smoke down the
s and in the eyes — acquired a sweet and piercing
nancy. There would be meals to cook on the journey,
ever, since we were travelling by bullock-cart and
cted to be on the road at least two days, and for these
ok the hand-made bellows and six cakes of dung.
er the granary floor our money lay buried · three rupees
ur own, three that Selvam had given us out of his
ings, and a ten rupee note that Kenny had sent through
am When everything was done I took out the money,
ted it and tucked it in securely at my waist. Then
were ready

he morning of our departure comes It is a still morning,
, dewy for it is yet early. The bullock-cart lumbers
the bells around the animals' necks jangling, they have
bells fixed to caps on the tips of their horns too, which
le as they move The cart is piled high with bales of
tly-packed skins, for we are passengers on a re-

journey, but there is room enough for two. We
Selvam hands us the two or three bundles we are
us which we hold on our laps until the carter tells
stow them on top of the bales. We do so, carefully

Then it is time to go. Selvam steps back. Ira comes
ward from the courtyard where she has been standing,
is holding her son by the hand. The three of them stand
line waiting to see us on our way. The carter flicks
bullocks with his whip, the animals strain forward, the
gives a lurch. Nathan holds out his hands, our child
bow their heads Then we begin to move and the three
them come after us a little of the way, walking in the
the wheels grind out of the earth, until the bullocks beg
trot and they fall back The bullocks have found their
rhythm now, moving so that their hoofs strike the earth
gether and the yoke is borne steadily on their shoulders
are travelling fast. The hut—its inhabitants—recedes
hind us and yet in front of us, for we are sitting with
backs to the bullocks. Our beloved green fields fall away
a blur, the hut becomes a smudge on the horizon. St
strain our eyes to pierce the reddish dust the wheels
up. We are farther away with every turn of the wheels
stare at them fascinated until the spokes begin to
backwards while the rim is inexorably borne forward. I
dizzy, my throat is dry. I lean against my husband, h
already leaning on me, together we achieve a kind of c
fort.

The carter is asleep on his jointed perch: the bull
know the route well, they keep on without guidance
him. At midday we halt near a small wayside well
carter wakens, snorts, stretches himself before climbing d
We are to eat here, he says, and he unyokes the bullocks
water them. I see one of them has a large raw patch o
shoulder where the yoke has rubbed the skin off.

"The animal is not well," I say to the man.

He shrugs: "What can I do? I have no other. I
make these trips since they are my livelihood."

We wash, eat, wash again, then proceed.

Mile after mile of dusty road stretching out straight before lined here and there with cool shady banyans or tama-trees. The bullock with the sore patch is slowing the up; the carter turns impatient and brings out his p. It is no use, its pace does not alter We pass other ock-carts, are passed by some, eat again, sleep again At it we stop while the carter lights the lantern slung be-h the cart, then we move on in the darkness and the ll yellow light-disc travels with us like a comforting on On and on, and on and on, we journey.

he cart driver roused us when we reached the outskirts he city where my son worked It was mid-afternoon, sun was streaming down hot and at its most powerful.

Here you are. This is as far as I can take you" He red Nathan, who sat with his head lolling against the s, fast asleep I shook him, pushing his head erect

Wake up, we have arrived"

e opened his eyes, reddened and with drooping lids

I could easily sleep the whole day through," he said, ing and stretching.

We are late already," the carter was grumbling "I ld have got here by morning if only this bullock had better pace——"

e leaped down and lifted the yoke preparatory to water-is animals. The raw patch on the bullock I had noticed e had begun to fester, more skin had been eaten away trickles of blood were running down the edges

This animal will soon be fit for nothing," he muttered imself "Heaven knows when I shall be able to afford her"

s soon as the animals had drunk he put the yoke back. bullock cringed, but accepted the torment and as soon e whip fell it began to pull again

e carter leaned from his perch to call to us, his face and perspiring. "Good luck friends, keep well!" His e was friendly.

Goodbye, go '

For a little while we stood by the roadside, cur about us. There were three turnings before us and was no telling which way lay the house of our son Nathan picked up the mats

"Come along We may meet somebody soon."

We chose a road at random, walked for some time out seeing anyone 'We should have asked the cart thought. 'He would have known'; but did not say so. length we saw two men approaching, jogging along tow us with bundles on their heads.

"Can you direct us to Koil Street, friend?"

"Koil Street? Let me see," he put up his hand to sc his head, but, the burden being there, withdrew it.

"No, I do not Brother, can you tell these people hey want to know?"

His companion thought. "I have heard of it. emember now, it is in one of the suburbs of the town way from here, but this is the right road"

"How far?"

"About fifteen miles If you keep to the road yo et a lift," he added good-naturedly, seeing our cre aces.

We plodded on Several bullock-carts passed us and r two jutkas, but none stopped Most of them were aden already. The bundle I carried, for all that it cont little, grew heavier with each step, my neck was ith the effort of holding my head steady, for the as poised on top Under each arm was a cooking henever the sweat came trickling down — which happ equently, it was a hot day — I had to stop and put own before wiping my face My husband, similarly be l, and troubled more than I was by flies and insects, lso to stop frequently, so our going was slow.

As we progressed the road broadened; it split and ther roads curled away from it and more came to , so that it was difficult to know whether we were k the right road or not Many people were about, uickly and intent on their business: we did not

asy to stop and ask them the way. Not only people but
affic — bullock-carts, jutkas, cars and bicycles, more than
e had ever seen, many times thicker than in the town
round the tannery. The noise never let up car horns,
produce
ts impos-
we were
bells we
ad not heard Once a jutka almost ran us over the driver
st managed to pull up the horse and while we stood pal-
itating he leaned from his seat, irate and frightened, to
out at us His voice was very loud, and he shook his
t as he drove off. Several people stopped to stare at us
riously as we hurried on

We had reached the city's centre, Koil Street lay some
miles away, and we were still not sure of finding it I
uld see Nathan was very tired · the heat and the noise,
e bustle of the city, had taken their toll He was walking
ggishly, now and again he stumbled, and at last I said,
"Let us rest for a while, it will do us both good"

He agreed at once, we found a quieter side street, and
ankfully putting our burdens beside us sank down No
e paid any attention to us We were allowed to sit there
peace. We had bought on the way a hand of plantains,
which four remained, and as we had not eaten since
orning I brought these out, giving two to my husband and
ting two myself It was nearly dusk · the activities of
e city were beginning to die down, the noise was decreas-
g Soon street lights were winking and in the shops gas
mps and hurricane lanterns were lighting up, but in the
tle side alley where we sat it was dark — darker than the
r and the sky above us from the shadows cast by the
ildings on either side

It was such a relief to rest, and the thought of continuing
e search was so unwelcome, that we sat on while the gloom
ickened and night crept up on us When at last we rose,
ars were bright in the sky. 'We have stayed too lo
ought uneasily 'We shall not reach our son tonig

In the precincts of the temple, shops and stalls were open, ghtly lit with gas lamps with their owners standing or ting within and calling out their wares to passers-by; it most had no money to spend At one shop pilaus were ing sold, mounds of saffron rice on buttered plantain aves, glistening with ghee and garnished with red chillies d curling strips of fried onion The smell from it, rich d tempting, swirled up with the puffs of steam from the iling rice. Impossible to shut it out, useless to try the grant smell was everywhere. I felt a cramp beginning in stomach, held it with an effort that turned me giddy; en it had passed, the familiar symptoms of nausea began than pressed my arm in sympathy; he too looked queasy

and along the corridors we whom this was evidently a vaulted chamber with arched es Here we stopped and down to wait with the rest on the stone floor On the k inner chamber the God and Goddess were seated on ir thrones, freshly anointed and garlanded with flowers their feet were piled betel-leaves, rice and a host of eetmeats

A woman sitting beside me nudged and pointed

"The food is given to the poor — to us — when it has en blessed There is a lot tonight," she added. "You e lucky!" I saw her sucking her lips in anticipation.

After a while two priests with half-shaven heads entered e carried a beakerful of water, the other a tray of more tive offerings, which they placed at the feet of the God lls began to tinkle; at their sound the priests began in- ning the prayers, one taking up where the other left off veryone was standing, most of them with hands folded and osed eyes. I closed my eyes, too, pressing my hands over em. The eye-balls felt hot under the lids I could see neath them a black-rimmed orange glow against which ated the images of the past — my sons, Ira, the hut where e lived and the fields we had worked The more I banished em the faster ... came, I saw Old Granny again

portions.' *Then I saw two men enter bringing the food and* all other thought ceased. Craning my neck and body, standing on tiptoe, I saw the cauldrons they carried, cauldrons of rice heaped high and showing white gleaming peaks from which wisps of *steam* issued, *and* pots *filled with a mixture* of dhal and vegetables which sent forth a most savoury smell

From a pile beside him one of the men took out a plantain leaf—not a whole one, but cut into pieces twice the size

[illegible]

ly by going close to the vessels that I could see any rice all One of the men rebuked me sharply.

"Keep your distance Do you want to devour pot and ?"

'I must ask for my husband,' *I thought,* and *found myself* asking The plantain leaf was handed to me, the rice placed on top, then the cup of dhal Now.

"If you would be so kind, sir," I said, "I will take my husband's *portion as well on my leaf"*

They gaped at me, surprised, affronted

"The woman is mad," one called out "Expects a double portion."

"Not satisfied with one," the other rejoined in an offended voice, "but must try and make capital out of charity."

"I do not," I said "I have a husband and he is here, ask only for his portion"

"If he is here let him come and we will serve him in his m We cannot hand out food to everyone merely because ey ask for it Do you take us for fools? Keep your tales r the unwary!" cried one, and the other called out impatiently:

Three or four had seen us searching, three or four more ned these, soon a small crowd of advisers and helpers llowed at our heels

"Are you sure it was this Hall of Pillars? There is an-er on the West side of the temple."

"Quite sure. We have not been on the other side"

"How could they?" said a scornful voice. "That side locked at night."

"Who was looking after the bundles?"

"*No one, no one ..we left them untended.*"

"Untended! *Looking for trouble that was!* *There are* ny thieves and strangers about these days"

"What, even in a temple! We did not think——"

"Yes, even in a temple, of course. Many kinds come e, there can be no guarantee of their honesty"

"It appears not," Nathan said heavily "Our possessions e gone"

There was futility only in further searching, further weari-s. We gave up and leant our backs against the painted l which encircled the temple, the vermilion and white bed wall we had foolishly thought meant safety The mise of shelter had been kept however: food, and some-re to sleep

"At least the loss is not irreparable," Nathan said "We e our money still, the pots and matting can be replaced"

"Best not to speak of it," I said, feeling cautiously for money in my waistband, the coins hard and comforting my touch "We must be careful"

He smiled wryly "After the horse has bolted?"

But I could not smile, and the ease with which he ac- 'Now I shall be wholly thought. 'I go to her r beggar off the streets;' u straightway I determined to spend one or two of the ns I *felt digging into my* flesh at the nearest bazaar, for would not go to her destitute. Soothed a little by the ought I drifted into sleep, broken often by bells ringing d the low rat-tat of drums for the prayers which

on at intervals throughout the night. Once in my half
it seemed to me someone was tugging at my arm, but
I woke it was only Nathan clutching at me in his sle
I dozed off again, and after a while I felt a soft fumbli
about my face, noiseless, like fingers on spindle cotton
strove to wake, to brush aside those pathetic flutterings, b
strive as I would I could not at last I sat up, sleep a
dream alike banished, wide awake now. And whether fr
the fact of sleeping in new surroundings, or from the b
we had sustained, I was unable to sleep again

I leant against that same wall by which we had laid ou
selves down, watching the wind play with the yellow fl
on top of the temple, looking into the darkness which var
its pitch from point to point Gradually I was able to ma
out the forms of the carven Gods and Goddesses on the si
of the temple, on the colonnades, and in the niches of t
walls, and as I gazed they seemed almost to live, their s
breasts gently breathing, their limbs lightly moving Na
— nearly could I believe what I saw, sitting there in the da
ness by the temple wall. Until dawn, when the stars f
one by one, and the grey light changed the sculp
figures back into immobility

CHAPTER XXV

| always Nathan stirred with the first light, when he
aw I was awake he sat up quickly, rubbing the sleep
| his eyes.

You slept well," I said, a little envious because I had
yet glad since he looked so much better for it.

Yes, I was tired But you look as if you had been up
ight."

Almost .I could not sleep"

You were worried no doubt," he said gravely, and the
rn in his voice made me slightly ashamed of myself.
l, we shall soon be with our son and you will be able
st Come, we may as well start now — the sooner the
r"

I went to wash at the tap, threading our way among
leaps of rags under which men and women lay hud-
in sleep, their crutches or staffs and begging bowls
e them, and when we had done we went out the way
ad come in

rly though it was, many of the shops were open From
ood stalls came the spluttering of ghee and oil as bread
pancakes were fried, ready for the early worshippers
would soon be coming As we passed, Nathan hesitated
I saw him eyeing the crisp golden pancakes laid out
a platter.

et us buy a few," he said cheerfully "I am hungry
gh and you must be too"

or my part hesitated, although the food was tempting
gh, for the silver coins we had were few and precious
there was no telling what our needs might be; still
ld not very well deny him when I had already made up
ind to spend some of the money on cooking vessels,
so I put my hand in my waistband to take out the
y I had tied there

It being nearly midday we sat down to rest by the road-
de. A dozen or more children were playing there, dodging
and out of the traffic with a skill and indifference which
could not help admiring. For all their play they looked
if they had never eaten a full meal in their lives, with
eir ribs thrust *out and bellies full-blown like drums with*
ind and emptiness; and they were also extremely dirty
ith the dust of the roadside and the filth deposited upon
; and the running sores many of them had upon their
dies were clogged with mud where blood or pus had
ded. But they themselves were forgetful of their pains
or patient with them as the bullock had been — and played
ked and merry in the sun Merry, that is, until a crust of
ead fell on the road or a sweetmeat toppled from an
er-ambitious pyramid when, all childishness lost, all play
gotten, they fought ferociously in the dust for the food ..
children had fought thus too, I remembered, but time
d mellowed the memory or dimmed it, for it did not
m to me that they had struggled like these teeth bared,
ls clawing, ready, predatory like animals. But when
man of wealth passed they were as tender and pitiful as
dglings, beseeching with soft open mouths and limpid
es, their begging bowls meekly held before them and al-
[illegible] my children
[illegible] *they played*
[illegible] ed with the
[illegible] have, their
[illegible] years.
We may yet be forced to that, [illegible] an, pointing
the [illegible] our son——"
"N [illegible] by his dejection
Cor [illegible]
"L [illegible] They seem quick
ough"
He clicked his fingers and called, and they came with
right curious eyes, twittering like sparrows
"Tell me, my son, *do you* know where Koil Street ;

made off, his head down and his shoulders moving as he ran.

We stood and looked at the house, arrived but uncertain how to proceed, and it looked back at us neither inviting nor forbidding There was a wooden paling around it, broken by a small wooden gate, and at length — there being nobody in sight to ask — we walked through to the garden and so to the house The doors and windows in it were wide open as if the occupant needed all the fresh air there was, and we could see right to the back of the house where two or three men were sitting wearing the white tunics of servants, and one of them at length saw us and came forward, saying mechanically as if he had used the same words many times before, "Beggars are *not allowed here, only those who need* —— "

Then seeing we neither carried begging bowls nor held out our hands for alms he stopped short. "What have you come for?"

"Our son works here," Nathan said. "His name is Murugan."

"*Murugan? No one of that name works here*"

"Doesn't work here! Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure. There are only three servants employed, and Murugan is not one of them"

"There must be some mistake," Nathan muttered. He pulled out the slip of paper on which the address was written and handed it to the man, looking anxiously at him *as he read — or perhaps pretended to read, for he handed* it back quickly saying

"Yes, yes, no doubt it is written there — but you must take my word, he is not here now"

'Why did we not write?' I thought miserably. 'We should have written.' But we had been so sure he would be here, we had relied on it, it had never struck us that he *would leave without telling us*

Just then we heard a car driving up, and from it stepped a figure wearing shirt and trousers, carrying a small black bag

"I am not sure," she said with a hint of pity in her eyes, "but I have heard that he works for the Collector. He lives on Chamundi Hill," she added. "Anyone will show you the house: it is big enough."

We were at the gate when she came after us. "You ook faint—have you not eaten?"

"We were fed at the temple," I said, not meeting those hrewd eyes

"It is a long time since," she said. "You had better ave a meal here before you go" She called to the servant nd spoke to him rapidly, and he came, looking none too leased, to lead us to where we had to go

The servants' quarters lay behind the house and some istance away They consisted of three godowns standing n a row, square rooms with brick walls and stone floors, ach with a separate low doorway At the first one the nanservant, Das, stopped and beckoned us to enter. nside it was half-dark, for there was only one window igh up on the wall and a thick blue smoke was rising rom a corner where a young woman was busy cooking.

"These people are to eat with us," Das said "They re the parents of one Murugan who was before me."

The young woman rose and came to us cheerful and miling, nursing a round, chubby baby. "You are more han welcome— you seem very tired ."

Her friendliness, her smile, were warming like the sun on ld limbs, gentle as the rain on parched earth. I felt the tiffness that had collected in me departing, felt a new psurge of hope Nathan was visibly relaxed. "The rice s nearly cooked," the young woman was saying. "Perhaps you would like to wash before we eat—the tap is utside, my husband will show you"

Das was on his feet "Ah yes, I had forgotten. Certainly a wash will do you good" He sounded more riendly

We followed him out to the tap, which was about a furlong way. A cement floor had been built around the base he tap, but the water which dripped constantly i.

good to us and gives us rice and dhal. Today she send extra for you"

So we ate with easy conscience, for I would not like to have taken from the store of a family who were for all their kindness only strangers to us, and who moreover had enough mouths of their own to feed.

As evening wore on the mother brought out a striped mat, for she had persuaded us to stay the night, on which to sleep And sleep we did, the deep sleep of those who being tired have fed well and rested well.

The next morning early we departed, after thanking the doctor who was a woman, and Das and his wife who had cared so well for us, and she came to see us go with her curious-eyed children about her, sunny and smiling as when we had first seen her and to this day I see her as she was then, young and kind, with a warm smile ever ready on her lips.

"Come," Nathan said in a cracked voice. "Let us go in."

But we could not, although the door stood open, for sudden shyness had set a stranglehold upon us and the sense of intrusion was strong ..and in the end we stood by the open doorway and called

A thin girl with untidy hair came out · the baby we had heard crying at her hip, a small boy clinging to her sari; stood staring at us with a slight frown

"Who is it? What do you want?"

No smile, no welcome 'Perhaps she thinks we are beggars,' I thought. 'No wonder since we look it,' and once more the humiliation of having nothing, not even a cooking pot, smote at me

"We are Murugan's parents," Nathan said gently. "You must be his wife"

The girl nodded, then recollecting herself she drew aside so that we could enter, came after us and stood biting her lip as if uncertain what to say

"These must be our grandchildren," I said, trying not to notice her attitude "I have long wanted to see them."

"No doubt " the girl said, her lips twisting a little. "No doubt you want to see your son, too. He is not here."

"Not here," Nathan repeated "I was told he was here! When is he coming back?"

"I wish I knew," she replied "I do not think he will ever come back"

"What do you mean? Are you not his wife? What makes you say he will never return?"

"He left me," she replied bitterly "He has been gone nearly two years"

We had come a long way to meet bad news and now it seemed there was neither going back nor going forward What we had saved had been taken from us, there was nothing more ... nothing left to sell; neither y[illegible] strength left to t[illegible]

"Of course."

"One must live," she repeated, defiant, challenging, sensing reproach where none could be; for it is very true, one must live.

At midday, as she had said, she came back She had told us to wait, yet now her attitude said very clearly: 'You should not have taken me at my word, what I said was said in duty and for no other reason.' In a sullen silence she began preparing the meal, lighting the fire, fetching the water, boiling the rice, the baby astride her hip as before and whimpering unheeded. She did not speak until we had eaten Then she looked up

"Where will you go? Can you return to your village?" 'And when?' said her hostile questioning eyes 'I cannot keep you here indefinitely, the sooner you go the better."

"We must return to our village," Nathan agreed. "There is nothing for us here We came only because of our son, you understand"

She nodded "Yes, he has let us all down"

"Maybe there were reasons," I said Whatever claim this woman had on him, still he was my son, I could not let her heap all the blame on him. Her face darkened, anger bloated her lips and lit fires behind her black brooding eyes

"They were the usual ones: women and gambling," she said harshly

We looked at each other, trembling on the brink of a quarrel, bitterness parting the threads of forbearance one by one, but while a few still held, suddenly, the outward semblance fell away I saw only that she was a very young girl, frail beyond most, deserted by her husband and doing her best to feed herself and her children

"I am sorry," I said jerkily "I must have been out of my senses"

She nodded very slightly, accepting my explanat— the blaze dying out behind her face.

"It is better that we should go now," said N

she had displayed had gone with the fear that we migh have come to stay.

"Take care of yourselves," she called "Godspeec and may you get home safely" Her lips were smiling, she brought the boy to the door to wave to us

Though we had known them so short a while there was melancholy in the parting 'Maybe we shall never see them again,' I thought sadly, and I heard Nathan beside me heave a sigh Both of us absorbed in our thoughts, we did not understand the shouting we vaguely heard until one of the peons came running after us puffing and angry

"Are you deaf?" he bawled "I have told you three times that servants are not allowed to use this gate, yet you continue as if you had not heard!"

"We are not servants."

"Servants or not, it is all one! You must use the back gate Come on, if you are seen here I will lose my job."

We followed him Some distance from the main gate was a smaller one, and to this he pointed. "There! And remember to use it next time as well"

"There will not be a next time," said Nathan gently, "but we shall remember."

CHAPTER XXVII

ONE or two of the regulars in the t
"What, you back again! Trouble
in-law no doubt?"

"No, no trouble. All is well"

Some sniggered knowingly, others
"Ah well, things often turn out unexpect
luck will change soon"

A few were antagonistic and openly s
saw their share of the food shrinking w
nouth.

"Outsiders should not be allowed,
'Are there not enough destitute in th
hole of India flocking in?"

We looked at them resentfully . were
ey? Soon we were looking at
ful eye, wondering with each fresh
there would be

Each night was a struggle, more fierce
ally engaged in it I saw, night after
ot observed before the lame with their
way from them so that they fell and w
e feeble separated from their support
umbers were halved Many a time m
side unable to face the fray if I had n
s distaste of the whole procedure would
tarvation. As it was, more often than not
or two.

And when the crowd had dispersed, to
cavenge, in the cool of the night and e
n the quiet courtyards, or leaned our b

of brown earth and green fields and the ripe rustling paddy, not, curiously, as they were, but as we had first known them. fresh, open and unspoilt, with their delicate scents and sounds *untainted*, with the skies clear above them and the birds finding sanctuary amid the grasses. And at the same time, keeping pace with these longings, our distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervading *hatred*.

"Better to starve where we were bred than live here," Nathan said passionately. "Whatever happens, whatever awaits us, we must return"

But how? We have no money My husband can till and sow and reap with skill, but here there is no land. I can weave and spin, or plait matting, but there is no money for spindle, cotton or fibre For where shall a man turn who has no money? Where can he go? Wide, wide world, but as narrow as the coins in your hand Like a tethered goat, so far and no farther Only money can make the rope stretch, only money

Then one day I thought I would set myself up as a reader of letters such as there are in most villages, and surely also in cities?

"Whoever heard of a woman reader," said Nathan. "No one will come to you."

"If I ask little, and less than the others, custom there will surely be," said I "In any case one must try Even a few annas would help"

"Do you think you could?" Nathan was half-despondent, half-eager, and somehow the eagerness alone communicated itself to me.

"Yes, I am sure. If I write letters as well as read them, I shall earn even more."

"How can you write without paper or ink?"

"Who asks must provide," I said *confidently* "Leave it to me."

We looked at each other and hope stirred, albeit cautiously, making us

"He guided us to the doctor's house," I explained, "whe we first came."

There was a pause. Nathan began sharing out the ri and dhal, carefully tearing the plantain leaf he carried int three pieces on which to put each portion. I had with th day's earnings bought as usual one rice cake which I no broke to hand round. The boy stared at it: "You mu have money! Otherwise how could you buy rice cakes?"

I sighed. "I earn two annas a day by writing letters sometimes a little more, sometimes a littles less. I buy foo with it."

"Which is not unreasonable," Nathan said impatienth "seeing how one portion has sometimes to be stretched t three!"

At last Puli seemed satisfied. He began to eat, and on more I saw that he had no fingers, only stumps. He himse did not appear to find any difficulty in managing w except that once or twice he had to use both hands, and t was a certain awkwardness in his handling of the foo Despite myself I could not keep my eyes off his hands; th harder I tried to keep my gaze fixed elsewhere, the more ·tened itself to those stumps Puli, seemingly unawar continued eating stolidly. 'He is used to it,' I thought 'H knows and accepts the shameful probing curiosities of hum beings.'

When we had eaten, and fed the leaves to the goats, an washed, Puli to my surprise lay down beside us

"You had better go home," I said, nudging him "Wha will your poor mother think if you stay here all night?"

"I have no mother, poor or otherwise," he said. "Ther is no one to worry about me and none to worry me eithe which is a good thing," and turning on his side he fell in stantly asleep.

I might have felt apprehensive for him, but that I kne him to be eminently capable of looking after himself; o sorry, save that he so patently did not desire it; but I could not help feeling a vague responsibility which certainl I knew I was in no position to fulfil.

"He is probably better fitted to fend for himself than we are——" Nathan began, but although he was echoing my

[illegible]

[illegible]thoughtfully.

"You earn two annas," he asked, "after working all day?"

nodded: "Sometimes three or four"

"Between two and four then," he amended impatiently Have you no wish to earn more?"

I stared at him.

"If only I could," I said, half breathless "Is there [so]me way?"

"There is a stone quarry," he said, "not far from here. [St]one-breakers earn good wages"

"And who will employ us," said Nathan sadly, "at our [age]! Such heavy work would in any event be beyond us"

"Age doesn't matter," the boy said impatiently "As for [wh]o will employ you, there is no such thing Anyone can [go] and work and be paid by the results — so much for each [bas]kful."

"Are we not beyond such labour?"

"*Indeed no!* All kinds work in the quarry, men, women [an]d children I would work too," he added, "but I cannot [ho]ld a hammer or stone firmly enough One can earn a [lo]t *if one works quickly*"

"Lead on," Nathan said "We are in your hands"

We heard the noise of the stone-breakers long before we [re]ached *the quarry*, a clink-clank of stone on stone with [in]termittent dull explosions As we drew near, the din grew [lo]uder; we had to shout to make ourselves heard

The quarry was on a hillside, not the calm and pleasant [C]hamundi Hill, but another, lesser hill, bare and rocky, with [th]ere and there a few [illegible] of prickly pear On one side [o]f the hill the land [illegible]

"It is not a simple way of earning," I said, "and it is more difficult than it looks." And Nathan grumbled, "If we had a hammer, at least we should not have so much waste." Yet there were many like us without hammers and using only stones, who were making very good progress. Once or twice I stopped to watch, admiring and envious, while the stones broke obediently to the right size under their skilful blows and the knobbly heaps before them grew. Only once were we disturbed by blasting near us. Engrossed in our work, neither of us had observed the red flag, nor with the hammering constantly beating upon our eardrums, did we hear the whistle go; but Puli, more alert than either of us, hustled us to safety, and as we ran we felt the ground shake beneath us.

"You must learn to be careful," Puli said severely, while stones and earth still rained down on us like hail-stones. "Did you not hear the whistle, or the people who shouted to you? This blasting is a nuisance," he went on. "You will find your stones are scattered; but you will get used to it."

The stones were indeed scattered, and mixed inextricably with those of other workers. but when we had collected what we reckoned to be our pile no one raised any objections. "Sometimes one loses, sometimes one gains," a man said philosophically. "It evens itself out."

I was thankful there was this spirit of amity: we were

p of stones

eyes, very

before us was not very ... small. All about us people were stopping work. As the light faded so the clink-clank din died, in the gathering darkness only a few faint sounds of hammering told of a solitary stone-breaker continuing his labours.

I turned to the boy beside us. "Well, what now? Who pays us?"

"We must get a sack first," he replied. "Your husband had better wait here while we are gone. Come, I will show you the overseer's hut."

I thanked him, feeling surprised that Puli had not known, who was so competent in his way. Then I reminded my- that despite his airs he was only a child.

T, turn I entered. A man was sitting on the floor ting on a small raised wooden board resting on bricks ore him.

How many?" He did not raise his eyes

One only."

He entered something in a book and reached for some s, then he looked up. "Where is your sack?"

I have not got one I have just come for it," I stam- ed.

Why did you not ask for it in the first place?" he said ly. "Are you trying to get money for nothing?"

e put the coins back on the pile, took a basket from e stacked behind him

Here you are no sacks left And hurry up, else you t be paid tonight"

ook it and ran back to Nathan Breathless with haste lled the basket and I was back while the line of waiters stretched before the hut

Two sacks, one rupee three sacks, one-eight . " the seer's voice kept calling, monotonous, slightly weary. oping I placed my basket in front of him.

One sack, eight annas," he called; then impatiently, ing his rhythm, "Not there! Behind, with the others!" put the basket alongside the others Now at last I was e paid He took out the money, two coins, each a four- a piece, dropped them in my palm

athan was waiting, eager and impatient. "How much?"

Eight annas!"

e looked at each other, smiling, jubilant. "We shall be home," Nathan said softly "Think of it!"

t seemed natural that we should wait for Puli, and sure ugh he joined us a few minutes later. The boy had at- ed himself to us of his own accord and now both of us k it for granted he would remain.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FROM counting annas, as the days went by, we began to count rupees. Four rupees, five, six. Even Puli began show excitement. There was the time when we worked well — or the stones were so kind — that we earned a pee in a single day I handed the coin as usual to Puli, thrust it into the ragged pouch which covered his man-d. Where he transferred the money we gave him from e I do not know. It was his own business and he never : certainly not one pie was ever lost We walked back lant that day in the coppery twilight already edged with k, like ashes around dying embers A thin drizzle was ng, so fine it might have been dew, the ground beneath feet felt like the earth in the early morning and no longer reet In fancy I was already home.

he single, twisting road that led from the quarry soon into several streets, the main one leading to the bazaar, it was this that I took

I will go on to the temple," said Nathan. "I am a e tired besides it does not take two to buy rice cakes"

Maybe a little more than rice cakes this time," I said rfully, winking at the boy "You go on, we will give a surprise."

went to the small shop as I did each morning, Puli in er step beside me, and the vendor hailed me as an old tomer He was a good man, for all that I bought so e from him : he sought out the largest rice cakes for same money, and sometimes a lump of ghee to go with as well

"Wait a bit," I said, as he began to wrap the rice cake a plantain leaf "*There may be a little more today.*"

"Come into money, have you?" he cried, chuckling and pping his thigh with a loud report. "Well, you have me to the right man. I have a selection such as few have

and, mark you, cheaper than anybody else! What will y
have? Potato fritters, crisped in butter and melting ins
or these fried pancakes I have myself stuffed with onio
...Something sweet for the boy?...Sugar-whirls, or t
exquisite curly-curlies?"

What shall it be, what shall it be? I inspected all t
delicacies, which I had never dared to do before, and I fou
it next to impossible to decide between them. Puli, hopp
up and down beside me, was likewise veering from o
dainty to another "The pilau there, such a lovely sm
and it has roasted nuts in it — or no, I think the frit
will last longer ..."

In the end we bought the fried pancakes, one each, pay
six annas for the three, and four annas for two rice ca

"Well, if we are extravagant it is only once," I s
seeking to console my uneasy mind. "Ten annas is on
little over what we usually spend The change will do
good"

But the recklessness did not end there. As we walke
we passed a hawker, and he had a sensitive nose and sm
that we had a little money and little control to go wi
and he came after us pulling out and exhibiting his wa
and at last he took out a small wooden cart on whe
which he attached a string and pulled it along behind
as he came following us.

"A dum-dum cart," cried Puli, and he echoed
the man, "We need not buy, let us only stop and wat
and he tugged at my sari So we stopped to look at
toy and indeed it was a pretty thing, lovingly made
exactly like a real cart, the wood skilfully car
with painted spokes to the wheels and a yoke which mo
on the necks of the painted oxen.

"Pull it and hear the drum beat," said the wily
holding out the string to Puli, and how could he r
it, who was only a child, when I myself was enchant
So he jerked the string and as the cart came tow
him the legs of the oxen moved and the carter's

e and fell and the drum-sticks he held in them came n upon the tiny drum in front of him — a real drum, ingly made with cords up the sides and skin stretched tly over the top Dum-dum-dum-dum went the m, the quicker you pulled the faster it beat.

"Two annas only — you will never be able to buy cheaper. cost me all of that to make .. There is no profit to in it, I only sell because I must I have not sold one all day."

I sneaked a glance at Puli and he was looking at me h eyes like lamps He still held the string between stumps of his fingers, and kept yanking at it as if the mming was sweet to his ears.

"Why do you not pay for it with your own money if want it?" I said uneasily "I see you begging every . .. You know I have spent more than I ought ady"

"Two annas more won't matter," he wheedled. "I mise I will never ask you for anything.. ."

"But you have money of your own," I repeated. "I e seen it myself"

"I have spent it all," he said pitifully. "People gave at but now they are used to me . It is a hard world"

Again I thought, 'He is a child after all, still tender, eager. Whatever he may say or do he has lived only hort time, not easily' And even as I nodded he began bling at his pouch, unable in his haste to undo it, until last I had to do it for him, taking from it the coins I ded, still warm from his body, and handing them to hawker

Then extravagance grew frenzied encouraged by this se, and I could not stop myself from taking out two e annas to buy another cart. 'For my little grand-, I thought, 'who has had so much to bear from his th,' and I pictured his white transparent cheeks flush- with excitement while Ira hovered nearby with I. e like a flower and the . . smile that graced it.

shivering, but no longer violently. I broke up the two cakes and we ate in silence, depressed by the cease- rain. 'Nathan has eaten his share,' I thought. 'He st be better; it is the cold which makes him shiver' vertheless I said to him anxiously. "Stay behind and t—it is not good for you to go out in this rain. Tomorrow will be enough"

'Tomorrow and tomorrow it will rain," he replied. t is the monsoon. I cannot sit here idling while the s slip past and we are still far from home"

We went, the three of us, to the quarry, joining the raggled groups of workers toiling along the winding, ddy road Those who were richer bought and ned palm-leaf hooded cloaks which fell stiffly from d to thigh, making them look like walking beetles, but e protectors were expensive, twelve annas apiece, st of the workers did without

Rain had softened the road, liquid mud came squelch- up between my toes as I walked Ahead and behind were scores of footprints, many of them like small ls where water had seeped in The cart-tracks were full water too, long lines criss-crossing with mud flung up on er side of the trenches. Three or four empty bullock- ts passed us on the way to collect the broken stones, bullocks drawing them struggling to get through the rass, their hides slippery with sweat and rain. The t-wheels sank deep in the mud as they turned, mud ttered continuously from the creaking wheels

'The worst season of the year," a voice was grumbling ext year whatever happens I shall not work"

'Pah, you say that every year."

'No, really, this time I mean it .even if it means eating."

Plans, everyone had plans They were all built on ney. Save enough to keep dry, save enough to cast 's chains, save enough to go away.

The clink of stones came to us sodden with the distinct, unmistakable. A few brave souls had risen

The hawker took the money from me and mad quickly — no doubt fearing that I would come to senses. We continued on our way, Puli dragging on behind him, I carrying the other together with the cakes, the pancakes and the two-anna piece which all that was left of the day's earnings; while I th again and again of what I would say to my hus

Now we were within the precincts of the temple I caught sight of Nathan and ran towards him, bid the boy pick up the cart with its infernal drum: but no was bewitched, the cart must come dum-dumming behind

"I don't know what came over me," I blurted, pen "I shall work very hard tomorrow to make up. You will

Nathan looked at me, his eyes were dull 'He is e perated,' I thought 'No wonder!'

"We have a surprise for you," I said with false ch fulness. "Look, pancakes!"

Nathan gave them a glance, then rose hurriedl his feet. I saw him stagger to one side, away from stone corridors. When the spasm of sickness was over came back to lean against a pillar He was shiv

"It was the food," he gasped. "It turned my stoma

"You have worked too hard," I said. "It does no to strain oneself"

"The fever has been coming all day," he said. " this morning"

I felt his body and it was burning hot, the skin and stretched. He had obviously been ill for sev hours. 'Why did you have to do it?' I wanted to *'Why?'* But I only said, "Lie and rest. You will better." And I took his head in my lap and set my ha to massaging the pain from his limbs

The rain which had been a fine drizzle had bec by morning a heavy downpour. The air, as alway the beginning of the monsoon, lay like a blanket the earth, damp and suffocating, but when it blew wind came through the rain wet and chill. Nathan

Disjointed thoughts kept clattering through my brain or was the clatter only the rain? I stumbled down the l-slopes, treacherous with mud and stones, sighing with ef as I reached the road.

Half way along it, I saw a small knot of people gathered. othing can make me stop,' I thought, hurrying along. en one of the group called, "Ai! See to your man. has fallen."

stopped and my senses poised themselves on the brink insensibility, ready to swoop away at the merest nod a me. I shook off the blackness and went to him ugh the gathered people, who parted to let me through, closed their ranks as I knelt beside him.

e was lying by the side of the road where someone had ied him—not in the gutter but away from the road, void the mud-churning cart-wheels His body had made ugh of the wet mud, in it he lay jerking and twitching : to him the swollen gutter ran like a stream, noisily; e it I could hear his hoarse breathing I touched him *his body was as chill as the wind. The pitiless rain* splashing down uncaring I had no shield for him. ist I unwound part of my sari, meaning to tear it, but material would not tear. where my hands were it , limp and perished In despair I wound the rags t me again Nobody gave anything, nobody had ing to give, the men in loin-cloths, the women in tattered and sodden like mine 'It makes no difference,' ught to myself, and found the words being murmured nother.

e man took him by the armpits, another his feet I walking behind, with me other women, whispering s of comfort that the rain washed away as soon as were uttered. Sometimes there was a silence while waited for my answer, waited while I groped for s.

Has he been ill long?"

Yes; some time."

"Have you no sons to help?"

"Yes — no — not here."

I licked my wet lips There was a taste
and of the fresh sweetness of rainwater.
I had been crying.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE memories of that night are hard and bright within me like a diamond, and the fires that flash from it have range powers. Some are blue and wrap me gently in eir glow; or green and soothing like oxen eyes in the ght; but there are others, yellow and red, that sear me th their intensity When this happens I call to the mists d they come, like clouds that cover the sun But the fires emselves are always there, they will never be extinguished til my life itself is done

What do I remember? Every word, every detail. I nember walking along the wet deserted street by the wall the temple; I remember looking up for the flare that had r burnt on the top of the temple, and it was quenched; l the black demons of fear came shrieking at my ear l would not be silenced, for all that I repeated like a dwoman, 'Fire cannot burn in water.' I saw the faces men who were not there and of children from whom the had been filched, and yet it was a black night, blacker n black since the stars were hidden

They laid my husband on the paved floor and I sank wn beside him. Somebody brought a light, a hurricane-tern that burned steady in the stormy wind; somebody e, water His body was caked in mud, wet and dirty. wiped him clean, took his head in my lap The knot of ople who had come so far with me melted away into e darkness, in ones and twos, when they saw how it was. Nathan's head kept twitching from side to side, he called our sons and muttered words that I did not understand. e rays from the lantern fell on his wasted face, on the ght, yellowed skin, on the lips split with fever, on his nbs which were like a child's Sometimes his breath came tween his chattering teeth in gusts, rising above the

CHAPTER XXX

'HE days went by, Nathan no longer beside me; no more. Ashes and dust, scattered to the winds, mois-ed by the rain, unrecognisable. I picked up the frag-nts of my life and put them together, all but the missing e; and out of my affliction I called to Puli I do not w what words I used, when I think of what I may have I shiver. Rich promise to lure a child, before I knew ould be kept. Priceless treasure of health, not mine to . And he, compassionate creature, who drew from me arrows of sorrow one by one, listened, and when I came e I was not alone.

› good to be home at last, at last. The cart jolted to andstill. I looked about me at the land and it was to my starving spirit. I felt the earth beneath my feet wept for happiness The time of in-between, already emory, coiled away like a snake within its hole.

rom the unfinished, scaffolded building a figure emer-came running Selvam, my son

Thank God," he said "Are you all right?" and he . me My daughter joined us, her haste making her ithless Puli alone not of the family, standing a little rt awkwardly, clutching in his arms the dumdum cart. illed to him

My son," I said "We adopted him, your father and

You look tired and hungry," Ira said, taking his arm. ome with me and rest, I will prepare the rice."

'hey walked on ahead

Do not worry," Selvam said "We shall manage." ... what had to be said

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